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Hors-thème

Dark Margins: Invisibility and Obscenity in Thomas Pynchon's *V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, and *Gravity's Rainbow*

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Cet article propose d'explorer les thèmes de l'invisibilité et de l'obscénité dans les œuvres suivantes de Thomas Pynchon : *V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, et *Gravity's Rainbow*. Ces œuvres montrent un mouvement gradué allant du conflit entre les « animés » et les « inanimés », passant par la résistance contre ces derniers grâce à des stratégies d'invisibilité et allant jusqu'à une révélation de l'ultime et obscène défi posé à l'humanité par les « inanimés », et incarné par les « Nouvelles Technologies ». L'intervalle entre ces deux thèmes définit un espace de glissement

et aussi, paradoxalement, un point de rencontre entre les « Prétérites » et les « Elus » en vue d'une dominance technologique. La manière dont Pynchon aborde ces problèmes dans les années 60 et 70 reste encore pertinente au début du troisième millénaire quand le modèle cartésien se trouve compliqué par l'avènement d'une culture digitale prête à remplacer la réalité par le simulacre du cyberspace. Ce projet se heurte à une résistance invisible occupant les marges obscures non seulement du discours textuel, mais aussi de la société dans ses pratiques quotidiennes. L'invisibilité du Prétérite n'est pas seulement une réaction contre l'obscénité de l'Elu, mais se métamorphose aussi, en devenant elle-même un excès d'interprétation, en une autre forme d'obscénité technologique. Les trois œuvres de Pynchon mentionnées ci-dessus montrent que Prétérite et Elu ne sont jamais des positions stables mais définissent plutôt, de manière dialectique, un mouvement réciproque et perpétuel.

This paper explores the inter-related themes of invisibility and obscenity in Thomas Pynchon's *V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, and *Gravity's Rainbow*, as they reveal a gradated movement from the struggle between the "animate" and the "inanimate," to the resistance against the inanimateness of the system through strategies of invisibility, to, finally, the ultimate, obscene challenge posed by the inanimate to humanity as it takes the shape of what is known as the "new technologies." The margins between the two is a space of slippage and also, paradoxically, the locus of a discourse of technological power for both "Preterite" and "Elect," and Pynchon's treatment of these issues in the 1960s and 1970s is relevant at the beginning of the twenty-first century when the Cartesian model is complicated by a digital culture poised to replace reality with the simulacra of cyberspace; this prospect is initially met by a resistance of invisibility inhabiting the dark margins, not only of textual discourse, but also of society as it takes shape in the practices of everyday life. The invisibility of the Preterite is not only a reaction to the obscenity of the Elect but is also, as it reaches an interpretative extreme, another form of technological obscenity not less powerful than that of the Elect. Pynchon's three texts show that Preterite and Elect are never clear-cut positions but rather exhibit, in dialectical fashion, a slippage from one to the other.

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1Reading the works of Thomas Ruggles Pynchon Jr. is difficult, and both critics and readers are left with the impression that Pynchon's style and content offer a serious challenge to a clear-cut interpretative appraisal of the various elements at hand. Christopher Warren, at the 2003 conference Culture and the State, summarized this general feeling by saying "Pynchon is hard. The most compelling evidence for this oft-made point for me [...] is one number: 130. That is the approximate number of characters in *V*." (241). Indeed, Pynchon's first three novels, *V*. (1963), *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), have been seen as the epitome of the writer's tendencies to obscurity, and some have pointed out that they are "weak in at least the sense that they are susceptible to no one certain outline of an interpretation [...]. Many readers find them tedious and unreadable" (Seymour-Smith 146). In fact, the *New York Times* issue of May 8, 1974 reported, under the heading "Pulitzer Jurors Dismayed on Pynchon," that the 14-member board had found *Gravity's Rainbow* "turgid," "overwritten," and "obscene."¹

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2Pynchon shares with other writers of the twentieth century—among others, James Joyce, Henry Miller, William Burroughs, Norman Mailer, and Kurt Vonnegut—not only the double stigma of unreadability and obscenity, but also the propensity for presenting a text which puts the interpretative capabilities of his readers to task. This has been coupled with a tendency to be labeled obscene for indeed, as I will show, the two concepts of invisibility and obscenity, especially in the case of Pynchon's first three novels, are intrinsically and organically connected. I call these features dark margins, whereby the margins of one text intersect with those of another, bringing about an interpretative reversal which is best achieved, in this case, through—and because of—a dialectic of invisibility and obscenity.²

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3This paper explores the inter-related themes of invisibility and obscurity in *V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, and *Gravity's Rainbow*, as they reveal a graduated movement from what Pynchon sees as the struggle between the “animate” and the “inanimate,” to the resistance against the inanimateness of the system through strategies of invisibility, to, finally, the ultimate, obscene challenge posed by the inanimate to humanity as it takes the shape of what is known as the “new technologies.” The margins between the two is a space of slippage and also, paradoxically, the locus of a discourse of technological power for both “Preterite” and “Elect,”³ and Pynchon’s treatment of these issues in the 1960s and 1970s is relevant at the beginning of the twenty-first century with the advent of a digital culture poised to replace reality with the simulacra of cyberspace; this prospect is initially met by a resistance of invisibility inhabiting the dark margins, not only of textual discourse, but also of society as it takes shape in the practices of everyday life. If this relationship has been hinted at, what is also of interest is that the invisibility of the Preterite is not only a reaction to the obscenity of the Elect but is also, as it reaches an interpretative extreme, another form of technological obscenity not less powerful than that of the Elect. Pynchon’s three texts show that Preterite and Elect are never clear-cut positions but rather exhibit, in dialectical fashion, a slippage from one to the other.

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4In a series of sometimes bewildering events, Pynchon’s characters in *V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, and *Gravity's Rainbow*, those who constitute what he calls the “animate” or the “Preterite” (Benny Profane, a “schlemihl” and his “Whole Sick Crew,” Oedipa Maas, and Tyrone Slothrop) are crossing a galaxy of signifiers: *V.* may equally stand for Venus, for the Virgin, for Victory, for Vheissu, for various women whose name begins with the letter “V,” for the V. rocket, or for the v-shaped splash at the end of the novel⁴; Oedipa’s interest in the Tristero and its resistance fighters crosses paths with a full-fledged but invisible mailing system, the use of bones of soldiers killed in various battles at various times, and the anomalies of American postal stamps for, as Jean-Yves Pellegrin judiciously observes, *The Crying of Lot 49*, “in the manner of a roman noir, opens up indeed on a death and on an enigma”; the question of invisibility is a vast one, but forms one of the backbones of Pynchon’s three novels, where traces, clues, and evidence lay scattered for the protagonists and the readers to put together and decipher.⁵ Slothrop’s dealings with the rocket, with the “White Visitation” project, with various women he encounters along the way, with the African Hereros, and with a horde of issues and events too numerous to mention, are part of a strategy of interpretative and ontological disappearance. The incessant movement, the amount of walking and traveling witnessed in Pynchon’s three novels echo Roland Barthes’ description of reading: “I pass, I intersect, I articulate, I release, I do not count. Forgetting meanings is not a matter for excuses, an unfortunate defect in performance; it is an affirmative value [...] it is precisely because I forget that I read” (11).

5But Pynchon is not interested in theoretical games of the kind favored by experimental postmodern writers, and his idiosyncrasies of style and structure have not stopped critics from recognizing his novels' very real potential for political and ideological resistance and change.⁶ These variant forms of invisibility and obscenity have been associated with history and the responsibility entailed in writing it: as Daniel Punday notes, "[g]hosts have become more important through the course of Thomas Pynchon's career" (250), precisely because they have become the symbol of what is left untold and unwritten.

6But is invisibility the unambiguous "dark" counterpart to the Elect's manipulation of history or rather the other, equally obscene, and equally dark, side of the equation? Some critics have ignored the potential complications and insisted that the real issue is power. Patrick McHugh sees in *V.*, in *The Crying of Lot 49*, and in *Gravity's Rainbow*, a clear opposition between the haves and the have-nots, between the "Elect" and the "Preterite," the unfavored who have been dismissed and relegated to the dark margins of history. His division, however, sets up a binary pair which can be more fruitfully complicated by a dialectical relationship between the two elements:

[o]n one side, an oppressive and hegemonic "System" serving an elite or "Elect" "They" is coercing the entire planet toward military apocalypse. On the other side, a victimized, mostly powerless, and likeably human "preterite" "us" attempts in varying ways and with varying degrees of manic euphoria and desperate futility to counter the apocalyptic momentum of the System. (3)

7The Hereros of Namibia appear in both *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, the first time in a long episode during one incarnation of the elusive *V.*, when the Germans, in what was called the Südwest, are depicted not only as murdering Hereros, but also as dehumanizing and demonizing the inhabitants after escaping and secluding themselves in a castle and indulging in transgressive and perverse practices not only among themselves but also upon the captured natives; the second time when the Hereros, in the third novel, are formed—by the Germans turned Nazis—into a "Schwarzcommando," a "Black Commando" uprooted from the Südwest and trained to re-infiltrate Africa and spread the Nazi ideology. Similarly, William Gleason's description of blacks as being "one part of a multi-cultural 'salad of despair'" (85), is only partly accurate: from darkness to secrecy, the Hereros in fact divide into two insurgent groups, one led towards an ideology of disappearance and suicide, another towards violent struggle through the grabbing of another *V.*, this time the secret German *V.* rocket.

8How can the dark margins of society become empowered despite a superior enemy, the "Elect," who possess, in *V.*, the machines, in *The Crying of Lot 49*, the

governmental agencies, and in *Gravity's Rainbow*, superior technology in the form of advanced physics and the power of mathematical equations? How can the "Preterite," the common and forsaken people, evade systems of power, control, and surveillance? As Gleason vividly asks about *The Crying of Lot 49* and the W.A.S.T.E. system, "[h]ow can junk communicate so powerfully?" (86). Junk, both as mail and as Preterite, can indeed communicate by devising practices of everyday life that remain, up to a certain point, invisible to the Elect, a paradox made suddenly visible to Oedipa Maas:

For here were God knew how many citizens, deliberately choosing not to communicate by US Mail. It was not an act of treason, nor possibly even of defiance. But it was a calculated withdrawal, from the life of the Republic, from its machinery. Whatever else was being denied them out of hate, indifference to the power of their vote, loopholes, simple ignorance, this withdrawal was their own, unpublicized, private. (86)

9The conscious choice made by the users of a mailing route running parallel to the official, sanctioned, and therefore controlled system is a distancing away not only from nodes of surveillance but also from centers of overt decision-making processes.

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10In a Foucauldian vision of power, what Pynchon calls the Elect have managed, through a recognition of relations existing at every level in society, to keep and use the discourse of institutionalized rules and practices that extend to cover, by the same token, ways of interpretation and ways of reading.⁷ A strict partitioning of space is, among other ways, an effective means of ordering what is seen as a chaotic use of resources. V.'s gradual turning into a prosthetic, highly advanced machine, the US government's postal system in *The Crying of Lot 49*, and the vast surveillance apparatus built around Slothrop in *Gravity's Rainbow* are all different instances of a mapped strategy of the body, communication, and space. Foucault calls such enclosed and observed space "a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism" (1975, 197) and the panopticon, Jeremy Bentham's design used by Foucault to illustrate his theory of surveillance and self-discipline, features in Pynchon's novels as the tower-like castle where the Germans are besieged but from where they shoot Africans and/or capture and then torture them, as the central postal service, as the Nazi observation towers, and ultimately as the secret V. rocket with its devastatingly punishing load. Total control is reached when the Preterite are assumed to have been coerced into exercising a form of self-surveillance which will lead to the "automatic functioning of power" (1975, 201). The Foucauldian model admits resistance with difficulty, always encompassing it, in the final analysis, within power; there is no escape in such a scheme, for resistance, "by definition [...] can only exist in the strategic field of power relations" (1976, 124-26).

11 In such an iron-clad system, how is Benny Profane, “schlemihl” and occasional sewer-alligator hunter, able to escape the rationalizing, mapped-out fate of Herbert Stencil in search of V.? How is Oedipa Maas able to grasp the W.A.S.T.E. underground mailing system running invisibly parallel to the US post? And how is Tyrone Slothrop able to circumvent all attempts at detection and surveillance by the three super-powers of the time, and to reach the open-ended salvation denied to the Elect? The “practice of everyday life,” in a de Certeauan sense, works as a counterpoint to considerations of power and situates Pynchon’s elaboration and development of a strategy of salvation through invisibility. The common people—what Pynchon calls the “animate” in *V.*, the “W.A.S.T.E.” system in *The Crying of Lot 49*, and the “Preterite” in *Gravity’s Rainbow*—are indeed able to evade the vast structure of control and surveillance put in place by centers of power. What was conceived as powerless masses of people is paradoxically seen as the locus of a body whose everyday practices inscribe a narrative of microcosmic proportions. Michel de Certeau’s aim was to investigate “the ways in which users—commonly assumed to be passive and guided by established rules—operate” (xi). Taking the example of the indigenous Indians under their Spanish colonizers, he situated them as being “other within the very colonization that outwardly assimilated them; their use of the dominant social order deflected its power, which they lacked the means to challenge; they escaped it without leaving it” (xiii). Invisibility does not remove its practitioners from the arena; on the contrary, it maintains their readiness to act and, as I will show, to potentially cross the “dark margins” and exchange roles with their counterparts.

12 The *Oxford Latin Dictionary* gives “praeteritus” as something that “has occurred, been done, etc., in the past, bygone, former” and also “expressing past action.” “Praeteritus” is also the past participle of the verb “praetere,” which gives interesting nuances to Preterite in this context, since it adds, to the usual definitions, that of “to omit (deliberately or otherwise) to mention or include, pass over; to pass over in reading” and, more importantly, “to miss with the eyes, fail to notice, to pass (a person) by,” and “to fail to come to the attention of, escape the notice or memory of; to pass by unnoticed” (1446). In other words, the preterite is the one which is omitted, not included, and missed from sight, from memory, and beyond notice. The Preterite is, therefore, not a thing of the past, outdone, outclassed, and written off but actually passed over in a reading which wants itself to cover everything but which, in this case, will not and cannot encompass, in its totality, the Preterite who remains, therefore, invisible.

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13 Indigenous Indians, Hereros, Jews, women, outcasts, and the poor in Pynchon’s three texts write their own practices within and along lines of power set up by the “Elect,” even if this entails going to the sewers and hunting stray alligators, besieging German occupiers in a castle on a hill, creating and using an alternate postal channel, allowing oneself to be programmed, used, followed, and lost in the “Zone,” or being set up as a secret black commando unit to disseminate the

ideology of Nazism.⁸ In all these cases, resistance follows the lines of least tension and accommodates itself, but only on the surface level, to the prevailing order. *The Crying of Lot 49's* underground mailing system, W.A.S.T.E., uses a muted horn as its rallying sign. As a symbol, it is also an almost invisible one: a barely perceptible mute has been added to the original, and legal, Thurn and Taxis emblem of a post horn, only there for those who take the time to scrutinize it.

14By muting the post horn, the invisible underground communication system operators are thereby writing their own narrative. Oedipa's encounters, as she follows the riddle of the muted post horn, with the dispossessed, the diseased, and the marginalized, open her eyes to a myriad of dialogical voices writing narratives that criss-cross the spectrum of human emotions. The network thus created, to borrow de Certeau's words, through "innumerable practices by means of which users reappropriate the space organized by techniques of sociocultural production" (xiv-xv), vies with the "inanimate" systems of the "Elect." Everyday practices become "tactical in character" (xix), and merge with the general flow, the only visible edge of what the "Elect," in their dehumanized and dehumanizing short-sightedness, are able to perceive. Indeed, what Oedipa Maas, Benny Profane, and Tyrone Slothrop spend their time doing is mainly walking, a tactic of everyday life par excellence that allows them to both reinscribe their own bearings and rewrite their own histories in the prevalently urban setting of mechanized control, and forge a new locus of power ultimately no less monstrous than that of the Elect. What Pynchon hints at, therefore, is that what may be taking place is actually a double-faced camouflage that swaps places with the other.

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15As a consequence, Pynchon's characters also exhibit, through their location at the margins between the seen and the unseen, a rhizomatic movement, where entities are, on the deeper level, inter-related. Communication through W.A.S.T.E. is effective only because it connects hitherto differentiated and seemingly separate modes of being, linking them through the underground of free signification. This communication, not only in *The Crying of Lot 49*, but also in *V.* and in *Gravity's Rainbow*, does not have, in postmodern fashion, to be meaningful on the interpretative level. Oedipa's first and fortuitous contact with the W.A.S.T.E. system reveals to her that communication is its own *raison d'être*, as members of the system have to send at least one letter per week to somebody else in the network, even at the cost of triteness. This, in the context of the rhizome, conforms to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of reading where there is not much to be understood, but a lot to be seen as connections and multiplicities among "bodies without organs" (10), and also provides a model for the dark margins as the criss-crossing of the various elements. Pellegrin also notes that the many incarnations of the Borgesian labyrinth in *The Crying of Lot 49* are not the locus of loss but "the space of intertwining and of the rhizome" because they ultimately point to the "imminence of a revelation." Reading is a nomadic activity

reflected in Pynchon's characters who, with the reader, write and re-write their interpretative discourse as it continuously changes the narrative told. Movement—physically in walking and interpretatively in the rhizome—is at the heart of the Preterite's strategy of survival, and what Hakim Bey says in his *Temporary Autonomous Zone* about nomads who “practice the razzia” and set up “camps of black tents under the desert stars, interzones, hidden fortified oases along secret caravan routes, ‘liberated’ bits of jungle and bad-land, no-go areas, black markets, and underground bazaars” (105), can be equally applied to the Preterite as they subvert the Elect in the “Zone.”[9](#)

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16This “Zone” represents, to use Pierre-Yves Petillon's words, a “world in abeyance, all fences down,” a “moving theater of a gigantic Völkerwanderung not seen since the 5th century and the barbarian invasions,” witnessing “long lines of fugitives, exiles, deported people move across the gray and green earth, across a world out-of-joint, evacuated hordes of vagabonds, camps in the morning breezes, fragments of failing history for a brief season drifting off into the open” (30). But will the “razzia” last forever? How actually “liberated” are the “bits of jungle”? And isn't reading, by definition, never always nomadic but also always reverting to a sedentary locus of readability?[10](#) The invisibility of the “Preterite,” a nomad moving rhizomatically alongside the stultifying discourse of the “Elect,” can come very close to resembling its opposite, for one can also stop to consider that the Elects' favorite tool is also invisibility, whether on the discursive level with the mediatic and academic ability to use and manipulate language in order to delimit, map out, and then control reality (Edward Said's *Orientalism* has, once and for all, debunked the myth of “innocent” disciplines) or, more coarsely, in the invisible yet potent surveillance, gathering of intelligence, and subsequent control of world affairs.[11](#)

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17If invisibility makes up one side of the dark margins in Pynchon's first three novels, obscenity makes up the other, and Pynchon's aim has been to remind his readers that the difference between the two is a very tenuous one, and that the juggling with possibilities acted by Pynchon's characters is prone, at any moment, to slide into a monstrosity of meaning.[12](#) The two dark margins of Preterite and Elect come together and meet at a point and, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, this edge brings together, in a progression beginning with a woman's half-naked body and ending with the mysteries of the universe, the dark margins of machine and flesh, of Elect and Preterite, of control and invisibility:

How the penises of Western men have leapt, for a century, to the sight of this singular point at the top of a lady's stocking, this transition from silk to bare skin and suspender! It's easy for non-fetishists to

sneer about Pavlovian conditioning and let it go at that, but any underwear enthusiast worth his unwholesome giggle can tell you there is much more here—there is a cosmology. (396)

18The attraction of this edge finds an echo in Barthes' description of Sadian obscenity and invisibility as applied to language:

Two edges are created: an obedient, conformist, plagiarizing edge (the language is to be copied in its canonical state, as it has been established by schooling, good usage, literature, culture), and *another edge*, mobile, blank (ready to assume any contours), which is never anything but the site of its effect: the place where the death of language is glimpsed. (Sontag 405-406)

19These two edges are reflected in the relationship between the Preterite and the Elect, in their confrontation and opposition as a force of invisibility and fluidity against one of brute control and fixity but also, more interestingly, in the complication of this equation through the allowing of the dark margins between invisibility and obscenity to commingle in a way that will blur recognizable boundaries between Preterite and Elect. It is precisely there, at the intersection between the two, that Pynchon's *dark margins* are revealed, what Barthes again describes as the two edges' necessary "compromise," the "seam between them, the fault, the flaw" (Sontag 406).

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20What the Elect, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, are doing, is substituting the Preterite's mundane and pedestrian nomadism with a violence towards meaning and the silencing of the other's voice. Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism* concludes with the image of late capitalism's "newly emergent global proletariat," born of "radically new technologies" and bearing little resemblance to the "disappearing working class"; this substitution marks "the more obscene celebrations of contemporary capitalist pluralism and democracy" with the system in power "congratulating itself for producing ever greater quantities of structurally unemployable subjects" (319-20). What the Preterite will do, covertly, is to regain this voice and turn it against the Elect but also, ultimately, against themselves.[13](#)

21Obscenity is, with Pynchon, the death-wish towards the inanimate which drives not only his characters—first in *V.*, then mainly in *Gravity's Rainbow*—but also contemporary society in the pursuit of technology as a substitute for life. In a passage at the end of *V.*, what appears to be the latest incarnation of the mysterious V.—after being successively known as Victoria Wren, as Veronica Manganese, as Vera Meroving, and as Veronica, the female rat Father Fairing was preaching the gospel to—finally appears in Malta, disguised as a priest, and is trapped under a fallen beam during a World War II air raid. The children (always Preterite to Pynchon but, as the example below shows, themselves capable of a

monstrous act of dismemberment) who had come running are faced with a terrifying discovery as they are watched by the narrator, Fausto Maijstral:

One pried her jaws apart while another removed a set of false teeth [...] the children peeled back one eyelid to reveal a glass eye with the iris in the shape of a clock. This, too, they removed [...] Surely her arms and breasts could be detached; the skin of her legs be peeled away to reveal some intricate under-structure of silver openwork. Perhaps the trunk itself contained other wonders: intestines of parti-coloured silk, gay balloon-lungs, a rococo heart. (343)

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22As V. started out, in her present incarnation, as Victoria Wren, she crossed the border from Preterite to Elect and, like the equation-hungry physicists of the V. rocket in *Gravity's Rainbow*, had sold her self and her body to an inanimate technology which acknowledges no boundaries and which disdains the flesh, regarding it as a mere appendage and the locus of a violence towards self and other. The dehumanization of the Preterite is perfected when the body of the Elect is given over to the machine and, as Paul A. Bové noted, when the latter yearn to “disentangle themselves from fallen history and nature” (659). This profound ontological aversion to nature and the flesh is best exemplified in *Gravity's Rainbow* narrative of Frans Van der Groov, 17th-century Dutch traveler, explorer, and trader, who went to Mauritius and ended up “systematically killing off the native dodos for reasons he could not explain” (108), a clear harbinger of the excesses of modern technology.[14](#)

23Pynchon's engagement with the problems posed by post-industrialism becomes clearer when one looks at the advances made by what is now called the new technologies, linked to simulation, virtual reality, and cyberspace. In a vision similar to V.'s woman-as-machine metamorphosis above, Donna Haraway, in her celebrated “Cyborg Manifesto” of 1991, appealed to the inherent liberatory possibilities of cyberspace, especially for women, who have become “chimeras” and “cyborgs,” a “condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation” (292). Such a world “without gender” can also be “a world without genesis, but maybe also a world without end,” and can eventually offer a leap outside of “salvation history” altogether (292). But leaping outside of history is precisely what Pynchon doesn't want his readers to do in his first three novels. In fact, it is the Elect's dream to re-write history and to silence the Preterite's voice by creating an exclusive—and hence excluding—technological space.

24The Elect, in the contemporary world of cyberspace, are identified by Arthur Kroker and Michael A. Weinstein with the emergence of a new class they call the “virtual class,” the first to appear outside of geographical boundaries, fully mirroring the cyberspatial characteristic of non-physicality. Unlocatable yet

human, the paradox of virtual power makes Kroker and Weinstein ascribe to it dichotomous qualities: “A mutant class born at that instant when technology acquired organicity and became a living species, the technological class is itself a product of combinatorial logic. It stands as the first, self-conscious class expression of the universal net of post-human bodies” (78). As the Germans in V.’s 1904 and 1922 Africa and in *Gravity’s Rainbow*’s second world war; as the Americans, represented by “The White Visitation” team headed by Pudding and Pointsman, and as the Russians headed by Tchitcherine, the twenty-first-century Elect are trying, through an obscene—because it acknowledges no boundaries—use of technology, to erase, once and for all, a history which has been their constant nemesis. Ziauddin Sardar uses strong words to unmask the ideology behind this drive which is marketed as a technology of liberation. To him, the race to colonize the Earth has not ended; on the contrary, cyberspace is just another excuse to continue the subjugation of the weak by the strong and to wipe out—actually to almost *delete*—from the physical memory of humans centuries of oppression:

For the conquest to continue unabated, new terrestrial territories have to be found; and where they don’t actually exist, they must be created. Enter, cyberspace [...] a conscious reflection of the deepest desires, aspirations, experiential yearning and spiritual *Angst* of Western man. (734)

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25But isn’t the above a simplistic system which posits a good side and a bad side forever at odds?[15](#) Isn’t the “mutant class” mentioned above rather a constantly moving and morphing hybrid construction consisting, in turn, of both Elect *and* Preterite? Pynchon raises the problem of this dualism:

Manichaeans who see two Rockets, good and evil, who speak together in the sacred idiolalia of the Primal Twins (some say their names are Enzian and Blicero) of a good Rocket to take us to the stars, an evil Rocket for the World’s suicide, the two perpetually in struggle. (1973, 727)

26A “Manichean” vision of good and evil, i.e., of Preterite and Elect, and of their supposedly corresponding invisibility and obscenity can be more challengingly complicated when the dialectical nature of one “Rocket” taking different shapes as the narrative proceeds is accepted. Indeed, as Yves-Marie Léonet notes in this context, critics “have too often reduced the book’s tremendous richness to oversimplified patterns,” and have placed events into a “scheme of binary oppositions that imposes a dichotomous, or even Manichean, reading frame upon a book which rejects precisely such modes of narrow rationality” (35). The movement from sanity to insanity, from visible to invisible, from appearance to disappearance, is the epitome of a strategy of reading and writing which clearly

governs Pynchon's three novels. In *V.*, the very last paragraph tells us of the death of Sidney Stencil, whose boat is suddenly and inexplicably thrown in the air by a giant wave and slammed down on the waters "whose subsequent surface phenomena—whitecaps, kelp islands, any of a million flatnesses which should catch thereafter part of the brute sun's spectrum—showed nothing at all of what came to lie beneath, that quiet June day" (492). Sidney Stencil's disappearance can be seen as a metaphor of this Deleuzian movement from the smoothness of invisibility to the striatedness of control, and back to the obscene oblivion of disappearance in the midst of the rhizomatic underground. Likewise, at the very end of *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa is anxiously awaiting the beginning of the auction of Pierce Inverarity's stamp collection, the famous "lot 49," and the discovery of the identity of the unknown—and invisible in the text—bidder who is never made to appear textually, and the novel freezes on that never-to-be-fulfilled expectation; finally, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, also in the closing paragraph under the telling title of "Descent," the rocket launched by Weissmann lands, inexplicably, on the roof of a movie theatre in 1973 Los Angeles, burning the screen and raising the probability that the whole book was a film projection: "The screen is a dim page spread before us, white and silent. The film has broken, or a projector bulb has burned out. It was difficult even for us, old fans who've always been at the movies (haven't we?) to tell which before the darkness swept in" (760). The descent is not only that of the rocket, but also that of a sinking into disappearance and interpretative confusion.

27Paranoia, neurosis and madness as one type of obscenity which follows in the wake of invisibility are also what mark Pynchon's first three novels. In *Lot 49*, Oedipa's discovery of the Tristero's covert system and its transformation into a modern underground postal system has directly affected her own hold on reality and threatened the bases of her interpretative abilities. As she comes closer to the Tristero's secret, she realizes the extent of her departure from what she had come to perceive as reality:

Either you have stumbled indeed, without the aid of LSD or other indole alkaloids, on to a secret richness and concealed density of dream [...] Or you are hallucinating it. Or a plot has been mounted against you [...] Or you are fantasizing some such plot, in which case you are a nut, Oedipa, out of your skull. (117-18)

28Oedipa reaches the state where reality and its double mingle and exchange places and, approaching a zero-degree of reading and of writing her own version of events, she comes to the following conclusion: "Ones and zeroes. So did the couples arrange themselves [...] Another mode of meaning behind the obvious, or none. Either Oedipa in the orbiting ecstasy of a true paranoia, or a real Tristero" (126). The possibilities and combinations behind the simple binary opposites and the coming together of the "couples" of Preterite and Elect are made clear to Pynchon's protagonists in their quest for meaning. In *V.*, probably one of the most memorable—and, by the same token, both one of the funniest and most

sinister—passages in which the invisibility of the Preterite slowly slides into madness is the one recounting Father Fairing’s hallucinations about sewer rats taking over the streets of New York during the 1930s Great Depression, and his going down to live with them, preach to them, convert them to Catholicism, and also eat them for sustenance. Father Fairing’s journal vividly depicts the journey begun in the invisibility of the Preterite and ended in a madness which makes of his obscenities a mirror image of the Elect’s propensities to evil:

Accordingly, he built himself a small shelter on one bank of the sewer. His cassock for a bed, his breviary for a pillow [...] Here he drank and washed. After a breakfast of roast rat (“The livers,” he wrote, “are particularly succulent”) he set about his first task: learning to communicate with the rats. (118)

29Eating his own flock, eating his would-be converts, eating his supporters and sustenance, ultimately eating his own sanity and self, Fairing, in an Ouroboros-like process, re-enacts the fate of invisibility as it becomes obscene and then simply disappears again. The journal Fairing wrote and which is sent, long after his disappearance, to his Elect superiors in the Vatican, is so indicative of a reason gone awry that it is promptly sent back to oblivion:

[The journal] is still preserved in an inaccessible region of the Vatican library, and in the minds of the few old-timers in the New York Sewer Department who got to see it when it was discovered [...] The stories, by the time Profane heard them, were pretty much apocryphal and more fantasy than the record itself warranted. (120)

30Fairing, we learn later, is excommunicated, and became a “skeleton in Rome’s closet,” never to be allowed out again, although, ironically, he was a man “preaching to a congregation of rats with saints’ names, all to the intention of peace” (120).

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31When the Preterite’s initially ethical stances in the face of the Elect lead to the crossing of the dark margins between invisibility and obscenity, the result is a blurring of priorities even if, as Christopher Ames notes, “the essential force of scatology and obscenity—the exposing of what should be hidden, the voicing of what should be silent, and the association of those forces with the oppressed” (199) seems to be the necessary step that leads, paradoxically, the Preterite towards liberation and disintegration at the same time. Looking at the meaning of the term “obscene” will throw light on the ambiguity created: from Latin “obscenus,” the word means “boding ill, unpropitious, ill-omened,” and is probably connected to “scaevus” which means “situated on the left-hand side, unlucky,” and “instinctively choosing what is wrong, perverse, contrary, misguided.” The word is also related to “caenum” or “c num” meaning “mud,

filth, slime, sordid or ignoble condition, and scum” (1219, 1698, 253). Most of these definitions can semantically apply to the propitious-unpropitious duality of the Preterite, and the circle joining invisibility with obscenity is closed.[16](#)

32More interesting things can be done with the term and its association with visibility, though: if obscenity has been traditionally used in the context of pornography, Jameson, in his *Signatures of the Visible*, goes one step further by positing the visual as “essentially pornographic” because pornographic films “ask us to stare at the world as though it were a naked body” (1). Jean Baudrillard also plays on the similarity between the obscene and the seen, and his explanation can be fruitfully applied to the dialectical exchanges between Preterite and Elect and between invisible and visible, when he writes that our age is one of “radical obscenity” or, in other words, “visible and undifferentiated, among figures that were previously secret and distinct,” for “everything which loses its *scene* [...] becomes for that very reason *ob-scene*” (166, 213-14). Indeed, towards the end of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, when Slothrop, along with the reader, has passed through a dizzying galaxy of signifiers, he gradually disappears, becoming again not only invisible but scattered and, for the first time, like Oedipa and Benny Profane before, faced with the task of reading the unreadable, a kind of *paranoid reading* of what lies on the other side of the margin:

•

Omens grow clearer, more specific. He [Slothrop] watches flights of birds and patterns in the ashes of his fire, he reads the guts of trout he’s caught and cleaned, scraps of lost paper, graffiti on the broken walls where facing has been shot away to reveal the brick underneath—broken in specific shapes that may also be read. (623)[17](#)

33Slothrop’s essence has become scattered to such an extent that some of his fragments “have grown into consistent personae of their own,” and that “there’s no telling which of the Zone’s present-day population are offshoots of his original scattering” (742). In other words, Slothrop, like the other protagonists in the previous two novels, has become the Tarot card’s figure of the Fool (742), equated with the number 0, the absence of being, with the tip of his foot already falling into the abyss of interpretation. To borrow Baudrillard’s image, “visible things do not terminate in obscurity and in silence; they vanish into what is more visible than the visible: obscenity” (191).

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34The Fool’s unwary stepping into the void is also symbolically a rebirth and a positive affirmation of the self to accept the challenges and changes offered by life. In the context of Pynchon’s characters, this may be seen as a *good dissolution*, a salutary scattering which initiates Oedipa, Benny Profane, and Slothrop into the mysteries of textual interpretation and the enlightenment brought about by the

shuffling of signifiers. The sliding between the two dark margins of invisibility and obscenity may also be understood in a Bataillian sense as the drive to fuse with the universe through the tension between the instinctive and the rational, between Preterite and Elect, between disappearance-as-death and obscenity-as-disappearance. In other words, the union with the universal Preterite through an obscenity of invisibility breaks the artificial discontinuity engineered by the Elect: the scattering and dissolution started in the dark margins of invisibility represent the new phase of the Preterite's strategy of survival.¹⁸ However, another kind of scattering of meaning can be understood from the above, one not associated with a flatteringly spiritual epiphany but, on the contrary, with a loss of meaning, an obscenity which Barbara Will describes as "the unrepresentable, the pre-linguistic, or the anti-linguistic, a force of disruption and implosion" (127); in other words, a Borgesian "book of sand" where the encounter with infinity cannot be encompassed by accepted notions of time and space.

35 In Pynchon's first three novels, the Elects' use of technology to defy even the most basic laws of nature and humanity, symbolized by controlled communication, by the transmutation of flesh into machine, and by the Babel-like attempt to overcome gravity, is met not only by the schlemihl and the downtrodden invisibly but persistently writing the narratives of their everyday life, but also by their incarnations who, like the "Schwarzcommandos," have written their own parallel path built on a similar technology taking them on a collision course with the Elects as they share *the same ideology of obscenity*. Pynchon, like a book the pages of which have no beginning or end, has constructed his own self and his *œuvre* as both invisible and obscene, a writing of the edges, wavering alongside the dark margins of the barely cognizable yet uncannily familiar; Slothrop, Pynchon's nemesis, finally disappears in the Zone, with only one "last photograph" of him on the album of a rock group called, not surprisingly, "The Fool." What critics wrote about not knowing much about Thomas Ruggles Pynchon Jr., about how he writes, and about what he has in mind, is not only clarified, but also acquires a peculiar intensity when it is juxtaposed to a strategy of writing dialectically moving between invisibility and obscenity.

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NOTES

[1](#) As John Krafft reported in 1984, “others have dismissed the novels as ‘sports,’ as they were in turn overwhelmed, puzzled, and bored” (283). It is interesting to note that the charge of obscurity has not abated since then. Howard Schneider’s review of Pynchon’s last 1085-page book, *Against the Day*, laments the emptiness of characterization, and William Logan, in “Back to the Future: On Thomas Pynchon’s *Against the Day*,” calls it a “sprawling, untidy new novel” (226). See also Anne Mangen and Rolf Gaasland’s *Blissful Bewilderment: Studies in the Fiction of Thomas Pynchon* and Niran Abbas’ *Thomas Pynchon: Reading from the Margins*. Pynchon’s contribution to postmodern fiction has also been documented sufficiently: see Bernard Duyfhuizen’s “Deconstructing *Gravity’s Rainbow*” and Stephen P. Schuber’s “Textual Orbits/Orbiting Criticism: Deconstructing *Gravity’s Rainbow*.” As a reminder of Pynchon’s postmodern importance to current scholarship and his connection to the politics of paranoia, see Rachel Adams’ “The Ends of America, the Ends of Postmodernism,” David Cowart’s “Pynchon and the Sixties,” and Aaron S. Rosenfeld’s “The ‘Scanty Plot’: Orwell, Pynchon, and the Poetics of Paranoia.”

[2](#) In the context of “invisibility,” see Kathryn Hume’s “Books of the Dead: Postmortem Politics in Novels by Mailer, Burroughs, Acker, and Pynchon,” in which she examines the relationship between what she calls “alien otherworlds” and the spiritual death of America, as well as her “Robert Coover: The Metaphysics of Bondage,” where she describes Pynchon, Mailer, and Burroughs as viewing society in terms of control.

[3](#) Pynchon’s other works, especially *Vineland* and *Mason & Dixon*, also offer different narratives of resistance (*Vineland*’s characters, mainly Zoyd, Frenesi, Flash, and later Prairie under the initiatory guidance of DL and Takeshi with the Kunoichi Sisters—see note below—as well as a myriad other ones, engage in a pseudo-comic battle of survival against a system gone amok, symbolized by Brock Vond; *Mason & Dixon*’s eponymous protagonists are two faces of a European consciousness oriented towards the rights of women, colonization, and slavery, from Britain to Cape Town to America).

[4](#) When the “Rev Wicks Cherrycoke,” the narrator of *Mason & Dixon*, muses about the astronomers’ urge to “leave home and set sail upon dangerous seas, determining where upon the Globe they must go” in order to observe Venus’ transit, his niece Tenebrae quickly answers: “Love,—I knew it [...] ’Twas Love for the Planet Herself” (102).

[5](#) See also Marc Chénétier’s *Beyond Suspicion: New American Fiction Since 1960*, and Anne Battesti’s *Thomas Pynchon*.

[6](#) Patrick McHugh, in his “Cultural Politics, Postmodernism, and White Guys: Affect in *Gravity’s Rainbow*,” wrote that the novel “foregrounds the political

question central to debates in the 60s between the counterculture and the New Left,” and asks: “Does alternative cultural practice lead to change in social history?” He adds that Pynchon’s twist was to problematize the ways in which “the naïve young Ivy Leaguer Tyrone Slothrop [...] [could] resist without this resistance itself becoming a form of complicity and perpetuation” (1-2). Speaking about *Mason & Dixon*, Alessia Ricciardi, in “Lightness and Gravity: Calvino, Pynchon, and Postmodernity,” also writes that Pynchon’s use of history “is not merely the stage-prop of pastiche, but the point of departure for acts of ethical witnessing and ‘caring’” (1063).

[7](#) Margaret Lynd, in “Science, Narrative, and Agency in *Gravity’s Rainbow*,” discusses the relationship between discourse, science, and subjectivity in this Foucauldian context.

[8](#) Compare this with the following from *Mason & Dixon* about slaves in Cape Town: “Fruit Peels lie squash’d and slippery in the Gutters that run down to the Canals, where the Slaves are out in the Storm, doing their Owners’ Laundry, observing and reading each occurrence of Blood, Semen, Excrement, Saliva, Urine, Sweat, Road-Mud, dead Skin, and other such *Data* of Biography, whose pure form they practice Daily, before all is lixiviated ’neath Heaven” (88-89).

[9](#) See also the “Sisterhood of Kunoichi Attentives,” described, in *Vineland*, as “a sort of Esalen Institute for lady asskickers” and headed by Sister Rochelle, “Senior Attentive,” with her cohort of black *gi*-clad ninjutsu women (107-108). In the same context, Michael O’Bryan’s “Anarchist Withdrawal and Spiritual Redemption in James Joll and Thomas Pynchon” provides interesting insight into political activism, withdrawal, and underground movements in the first three novels, but mainly in *The Crying of Lot 49*.

[10](#) Bey ended up disavowing his own enthusiasm for the virtual “Zones” he so enthusiastically espoused. In his preface to the second edition of *T.A.Z.*, he wrote: “I think perhaps the least useful part of the book is its section on the Internet. I envisioned the Net as an adjunct to the TAZ, a technology in service to the TAZ, a means of potentiating its emergence [...] What a joke [...] What’s left of the Left now seems to inhabit a ghost-world where a few thousand ‘hits’ pass for political action and ‘virtual community’ takes the place of human presence” (xi).

[11](#) For potential links to Adam Smith’s famous economic concept of the “invisible hand” and its mirror image, the “invisible backhand,” see N. Emrah Aydinonat’s *The Invisible Hand in Economics*.

[12](#) That such sliding actually occurs in the novels may have escaped not only Pynchon’s readers and critics but also, paradoxically, Pynchon himself as he is equally caught, as author, in the technological game started in the construction of his published persona and continuing in mediatic invisibility.

[13](#) Pynchon, in his October 28, 1984, *New York Times Book Review* piece “Is it OK to Be a Luddite?” describes Luddites as Tristero-like “bands of men, organized, masked, anonymous, whose object was to destroy machinery used mostly in the textile industry,” and who “swore allegiance not to any British king but to their own King Ludd.” This masked, hence invisible, side of the Luddites is balanced by their leader’s own display of excess and who, while not exactly a “technophobic crazy,” exemplified the model of “the controlled, martial-arts type anger of the dedicated Badass.”

[14](#) See also Mason’s comment on the Dutch in Africa: “I have found it of help, Dixon, to think of this place as another Planet whither we have journey’d, where these Dutch-speaking White natives are as alien to the civilization we know as the very strangest of Pygmies” (*Mason & Dixon*, 69).

[15](#) As Nadine Attewell writes in “‘Bouncy Little Tunes’: Nostalgia, Sentimentality, and Narrative in *Gravity’s Rainbow*,” instead of following “an endless string of binaries [...] that may be reduced, ultimately, to the banality of good/bad,” readers are encouraged to “work through the muddle” of double agency to “recognize affirmation’s critiques and critique’s affirmations” (24).

[16](#) For a detailed analysis of the relationship between fascination and obscenity, see Matthew Kieran’s “On Obscenity: The Thrill and Repulsion of the Morally Prohibited.”

[17](#) Barthes used a surprisingly similar metaphor to explain the relationship between text and reader: “The text, in its mass, is comparable to a sky [...] like the soothsayer drawing on it with the tip of his staff an imaginary rectangle [...] the commentator traces through the text certain zones of reading, in order to observe therein the migration of meanings, the outcropping of codes, the passage of citations” (*S/Z*, 14).

[18](#) See Georges Bataille’s *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, in which he links “dissolution” with the “dissolute life” (11, 17).

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