

AUTHORITY AND AUTHENTICITY IN
GRAVITY'S RAINBOW AND *MASON & DIXON*

by

MICHAEL J. CROWLEY

(Under the direction of Hugh Ruppersburg)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation analyzes Thomas Pynchon's two major works in the context of postmodern encyclopedic novels and argues for a new understanding of how such novels are constructed. Examining *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon* as paradigmatic examples reveals a pattern common to other major instances of the form as well.

I begin by examining various conceptions of encyclopedic narrative. Pynchon's novels, though consistently described as encyclopedic, necessitate a revision of the concept. Encyclopedism provides a means of establishing narrative authority. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon's narrator both cultivates authority through encyclopedism and subverts that authority through self-parody. In *Mason & Dixon*, Pynchon's narrator claims an unwarranted authority for his encyclopedic tale. Both narrators, however, wield their authority with an eye toward guaranteeing the authenticity of their narratives. Lubomír Doležel's concept of authentication authority provides a framework in which to analyze Reverend Wicks Cherrycoke in greater detail.

After considering style and narration, I proceed to the plot structure of the two novels. In each case, the organization contributes to the overall representation of authenticity. Pynchon frames the central narratives of both works within events that combine elements of technological apocalypse with the possibility of the miraculous. Pynchon describes events of this nature as singular points, moments of radically undetermined potential. In doing so, he joins a long line of diverse thinkers who have similarly associated singular points with authenticity. Pynchon and other postmodern encyclopedic novelists have appropriated singular points as a means of resisting technological determinism. By using singular points to mark moments of discontinuity, they paradoxically frame their novels as unframed and undetermined.

Within this frame of authenticity, their encyclopedic style allows them to suggest that the events function as a synecdoche for history at the same time that they are discontinuous from history. Having developed this model with reference to a number of variations on the notion of singular points and several prototypical postmodern encyclopedic novels, I offer detailed analyses of how *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon* establish and modify the pattern. Previously overlooked, Pynchon's representation of authenticity comes to the foreground.

INDEX WORDS: American literature, Authenticity, Authority, Encyclopedic narrative, *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Mason & Dixon*, Thomas Pynchon

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MICHAEL J. CROWLEY

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by

MICHAEL J. CROWLEY

Major Professor: Hugh Ruppersburg

Committee: Douglas Anderson
Kris Boudreau
Barbara McCaskill
James Nagel

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
December 2002

DEDICATION

With love and gratitude:
for my parents,
Mike and Bernadette Crowley,
Alexis Hart,
and in memory of
Ellen McGrath
(1917-2002)

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Chapter 1

“[C]ompulsively [A]ccurate”: Authenticity in Literature

“A mechanickal Duck that shits? To whom can it matter,”

Mr. Whitpot, having remov'd his Wig, is irritably kneading it like a small Loaf, “—who besides a farmer would even recognize Duck Waste, however compulsively accurate?”—Thomas Pynchon

In the introduction to their recent collection of local color short stories, *American Local Color Writing, 1880-1920*, Elizabeth Ammons and Valerie Rohy place the issue of authenticity at the center of their account of local color writing. In doing so, they draw on the essays of practicing local colorists Hamlin Garland and Mary Austin: “Local color celebrates the lived experience of what Garland calls the ‘native’; as Austin notes, it valorizes ‘authenticity’ (106) above all” (Ammons and Rohy vii). For Austin, the authenticity that is central to regional writing rests on the “two indispensable conditions of the environment entering constructively into the story, and the story reflecting in some fashion the essential qualities of the land” though these qualities make it somewhat difficult to “put one’s finger on representative regional fiction” (106). Garland is more specific when he insists upon the defining attribute of local color writing: “*Local color in a novel means that it has such a quality of texture and back-ground that it could not have been written in any other place or by any one else than a native*” (53-54). The

authenticity of fiction that meets these demands rests on the authority of experience: the events could “not . . . have happened elsewhere” (Austin 100); in short, authors must know firsthand the lifestyles about which they write and must have inhabited the settings they describe.

Interestingly, local color has often been dismissed by critics for its failure to produce the very quality of authenticity that Ammons and Rohy identify as central. One version of this criticism holds that most of the stories parading under the banner of local color fail to incorporate regional elements organically in the manner Austin and Garland describe. Instead, they exploit “the picturesque for its own sake” and engage in “the curious pursuit of the unique, idiosyncratic, or grotesque” as ends in themselves, thus “laps[ing] into mere formula writing” (Baker 860). Another version of the argument maintains that despite Garland’s contention that “the tourist cannot write the local novel” (54), the mode lends itself to “preservationist and reactionary” purposes (Ammons and Rohy xvii). As Ammons and Rohy recognize, when employed for these purposes, local color is, in fact, “touristic, and like turn-of-the-century anthropology . . . obsessed with cataloging and control” (xvii). After all, despite Garland’s and Austin’s insistence to the contrary, many local color writers had not lived the lives they sought to represent in their stories; many were responding to marketplace demands for more sketches of increasingly exotic locales.

One solution to the dilemma raised by these criticisms is simply to classify local color writing into two categories. The first, published by the “few writers of the first magnitude” who engaged in the mode (Baker 859), consists of the “successful” or “classic” local color stories that still engage the interest of readers and critics today. The

second category, on the other hand, consists of mechanical genre exercises that are today largely forgotten. The former successfully cultivates the authentic representation of a particular region through the organic incorporation of details of character, custom, dialect, and other elements determined by setting, while the latter degenerates into formulas and stereotypes through the inept, condescending, or exploitative inclusion of such details. Although just such a distinction has long been promulgated—as in Carlos Baker’s treatment of local color in the *Literary History of the United States*, for instance—its subjectivity vitiates its usefulness. Another response is the one offered by Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse in the introduction to their 1992 anthology of regionalist writing by American women. Fetterley and Pryse employ the phrases “local color” and “regional realism” interchangeably but contrast both terms with their definition of regionalism. They base their distinction on the belief that regionalist stories, written almost exclusively by women and people of color according to their formulation, adopt a sympathetic perspective on the characters and traditions of the regions in question, while local color stories, written primarily by white men, adopt “the perspective of a narrator as superior to and outside of the region of the fiction . . . often to entertain and satisfy the curiosity of late-nineteenth-century urban readers in Boston and New York” (Fetterley and Pryse xii). Both of these responses to the problem of differentiating between successful and unsuccessful or sympathetic and exploitative local color writing are overly reductive and fall victim to the same “obsess[ion] with cataloging and control” that Ammons and Rohy identify as one of the dangers of regionalism. To create a hierarchy of this sort is to ignore the fact that local color writing in general, whether it

meets with our approval or not, employs the same techniques in order to represent authenticity.

Rather than simplifying local color in order to make it conform to prescriptive expectations either formalist or political in nature, the inherent contradictions of local color must be acknowledged. As a number of critics recognize, the contrasting impulses of local color writing account for much of its power. Robert D. Rhode, for instance, identifies a central tension between romantic and realist tendencies in local color writing: “On the one hand local color is fundamentally romantic, occupying itself with the strange the remote, the picturesque, the unfamiliar in place and time; on the other hand it is fundamentally realistic, preferring the immediate, the minute, the familiar, the scrupulously authentic” (14). Both of these tendencies are synthesized, however, in contributing “to the impression of actuality” for which local color stories strive (Rhode 18). In perhaps the most positive assessment of local color writing in the past several decades, Alice Hall Petry identifies the primary contradiction at the heart of local color as the dual assertion of particularized setting and universal significance. Far from being problematic, however, Petry argues that “the ‘tension’ between these two impulses often constitutes no tension whatsoever” (111). In contrast to Fetterley and Pryse, Petry emphasizes the consistent use of “interloper” narrators and the frame-tale structures that often accompany them as a means of cultivating a sympathetic perspective on the region depicted (115-16).

Ammons and Rohy effectively synthesize and respond to these conflicting treatments of local color. While they begin by foregrounding the question of authenticity, they also observe that the success of “nonrealist styles in local color

writing . . . suggests the limitations of accuracy and authenticity in local color writing” (xxv). While I would argue that authenticity in the guise of superficial verisimilitude is not necessary for authentic regional representations, taking this approach enables Ammons and Rohy to construct a version of local color that is as inclusive as possible. Furthermore, Ammons and Rohy recognize that the availability of the local color mode to both sympathetic and unsympathetic perspectives makes it “a double genre, at once normal and perverse, central and marginal” (xxiv). The tensions that Rhode and Petry identify are primary manifestations of the essential doubleness of local color. Furthermore, Ammons and Rohy argue persuasively that the source of local color’s double nature is its dependence on synecdoche as its primary rhetorical trope (xxv).

Local color stories posit a synecdochic relationship between the region in question and the nation as a whole (Ammons and Rohy xxv-xxvi), but in doing so they raise important “[q]uestions of representation and authority” (Ammons and Rohy viii). Needless to say, nearly any form of meaningful literature engages the issues of “representation and authority”; however, when a particular style is preeminently concerned with representing authenticity, these issues assume an added significance. As a result, Ammons and Rohy argue, the local color writing of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries confronts the contemporary reader with a number of questions, such as: “What is authenticity? What is at stake in the documentation of regional differences? . . . why did the construction of ‘America’ and of an ‘American tradition’ require the representation of cultural diversity? . . . what sexual ideology or collective fantasy motivated American writing to seek out the peculiarities of regional life?” (vii-viii). In order to place the features of local color writing in a larger context, one might add more

general concerns to those Ammons and Rohy enumerate: how is authenticity represented in fiction? On what authority may the authenticity of regional details and characteristics be validated?

I introduce the topic of local color and the questions it provokes to provide a means of entry and perhaps unexpected insight into the seemingly unrelated field of contemporary postmodern encyclopedic narratives, particularly as represented by Thomas Pynchon's novels *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon*. To begin a discussion of Thomas Pynchon with an account of local color writing, however brief, is presumably to begin by way of contrast. What could be more alien to the fantastically hypertrophic postmodern excesses of Pynchon's novels than the provincial, often didactic, sketches that typify local color? Of course, there are many disparities between the two. For instance, given his emphasis on the authority of firsthand experience as the basis for art, one can only imagine Garland's response to a description of Pynchon's research techniques as one of disgust. Far from emphasizing native elements in his fiction, Pynchon reports beginning his writing career with "an unkind impatience with fiction I felt then to be 'too autobiographical'" (Introduction SL xxxii). The few glimpses Pynchon affords of his methods reveal a process that seems wholly at odds with Garland's privileging of native authority. At the same time that Pynchon employs antithetical techniques, however, he consistently demonstrates an overriding concern for authenticity similar to the one Ammons and Rohy emphasize in local color writing.

In his introduction to *Slow Learner*, his collection of early short stories, Pynchon describes ransacking a Baedeker guide book as a source for his story "Under the Rose,"

literally relying on tourist information to create the story's background: "Could Willy Sutton rob a safe? Loot the Baedeker I did, all the details of a time and place I had never been to, right down to the names of the diplomatic corps. Who'd make up a name like Khevenhüller-Metsch?" (Introduction SL xxviii). While Pynchon disparages the techniques of his apprenticeship from the perspective of a quarter-century later, it is clear that he never entirely abandoned these habits. He later describes a similar "looting" that occurred after he had published his first novel, *V*. In this case, his early disdain for the authority of personal experience led the young Pynchon so far as to shift the events of his story "The Secret Integration" from his boyhood home of Long Island to "the Berkshires, where I still have never been" (Introduction SL xxxii). This relocation is quite significant since Pynchon briefly introduces the Slothrop family for the first time in the story; their Massachusetts heritage later plays an important role in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Rather than relying on his native familiarity with the setting, Pynchon chooses the authority of the Federal Writers Project guide book that became his source (Introduction SL xxxii). Even later, in a letter written while he was working on *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon explains how he came to incorporate the Herero subplots featured prominently both in *V*. and in *Gravity's Rainbow*: "I'm afraid I went at the whole thing in a kind of haphazard fashion—was actually looking for a report on Malta and happened to find the Bondelzwarts one right next to it in the same, what the NY Public Library calls, 'pamphlet volume'" ("To Thomas Hirsch" 240). However, in disparaging his early techniques, Pynchon is concerned more with his "haphazard" use of faulty information than with his methods of acquiring information. The fact that he stumbled across the history of the Hereros is not problematic at all. In enumerating one of the many defects

he finds characteristic of his early story “Entropy,” however, Pynchon declares inexcusable his use of the phrase “*grippe espagnole*” to connote “some kind of post-World War I spiritual malaise or something” (Introduction SL xxvi). As with the previous example, the problem is not that he acquired the phrase from “some liner notes to a recording of Stravinsky’s *L’Histoire du Soldat*” but that he failed to realize the phrase “means what it says, Spanish influenza” (Introduction SL xxvi). Pynchon repeatedly takes the position that the native authority Garland idealizes can be acquired secondhand.

While Pynchon is willing to recognize non-native authority, he is unwilling to compromise on the expectation of accuracy. When, as seen in the example of “Entropy,” a writer fails to employ accurately the local color details he or she would incorporate to create an authentic representation, Pynchon argues that the result is a form of artistic sloth:

Opera librettos, movies, and television drama are allowed to get away with all kinds of errors in detail. Too much time in front of the Tube and a writer can get to believing the same thing about fiction. Not so. [. . .] phony data are more often than not deployed in places sensitive enough to make a difference, thereby losing what marginal charm they may have possessed outside of the story’s context.¹ (Introduction SL xxvi)

The danger of incorporating inaccurate information is compounded by the fact that “we now live, we are told, in the Computer Age,” “an era when, at least in principle, everybody can share an inconceivably enormous amount of information” (Pynchon “Luddite” 41). The native authority that Garland identifies as the defining characteristic

of local color is based on a kind of geographical privilege that the native enjoys over the outsider. As Pynchon is writing ninety years later, however, increased mobility has markedly diminished the significance of regional differences, and as a result, the forms of specialized knowledge that result from geographical differences hold less authority and less interest than they did for Garland. Nonetheless, a species of regionalism survives in the form of other specialized areas of knowledge that have assumed greater importance in recent decades. While there are few remaining geographical localities to which natives have privileged access, these have been replaced by the explosions of information, particularly in the areas of science and technology, that have paralleled the interconnection of the various sections of both America and the world.

Pynchon's philosophical opposition to the positions Garland and Austin take on authenticity is suggested by the essay that followed soon after the publication of *Slow Learner*, "Is It O.K. to Be a Luddite?" Here, Pynchon explicitly rejects the privileging of native authority in the form of specialized knowledge. His immediate target in this essay is C. P. Snow's "two cultures" division, but the larger target is any one "who may still try to hide behind the jargon of a specialty or pretend to some data base forever 'beyond' the reach of a layman" (Pynchon "Luddite" 1). The optimistic picture that Pynchon paints of a near-future characterized by universally accessible information would make it possible for everyone to be a native or specialist. This democratizing effect also justifies both his "looting" of guide books and encyclopedias and his implicit demand that readers accommodate such information. The authority of direct experience has been displaced by the ready availability of information. Pynchon offers no justification for his inclusion of the various scientific concepts behind the term entropy in his short story of the same

name, even as he includes jargon derived from cybernetics, information theory, and thermodynamics. In fact, Pynchon claims not to have a particularly deep understanding of entropy at all (Introduction SL xxii). The technical forms of jargon that accompany specialized areas of knowledge can readily be recognized as a contemporary manifestation of the use of dialect that characterized nearly all local color writing. However, Pynchon's position that the authentic use of such language requires no special authority from experience is at odds with the philosophy regarding dialect characteristic of local color writing. In his critical account, Baker bemoans the pseudo-scientific approach to dialect that he finds typical of the genre (860). However, an almost universally admired example of this approach can be found in Samuel L. Clemens's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In his "Explanatory" note at the beginning of the novel, "THE AUTHOR" pre-emptively justifies his use of dialect in the novel. He explains, in part, that "The shadings have not been done in a hap-hazard fashion, or by guess-work; but pains-takingly, and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity with these several forms of speech" (Clemens lvii). Clemens, like Garland, claims the authority of the native. For Pynchon, in contrast, the simultaneous increase in mobility and availability of information has the effect of making everyone an authority on the local or native.

If everyone is potentially a local, however, the writer faces even more pressure to create authentic representations, yet he or she must do so from a position that lacks the privilege granted the native. As Pynchon explains, "There are no longer any excuses for small stupid mistakes" (Introduction SL xxvii). But the challenge for Pynchon as well as for other postmodern encyclopedic novelists is not simply a matter of getting the facts

right, and it is this realization that forms the heart of the miniature *künstlerroman* contained in Pynchon's introduction to *Slow Learner*. More important than avoiding the "stupid mistakes" that he faults in his early stories is overcoming "the notion that one's personal life had nothing to do with fiction" (Introduction SL xxxii). "The truth," Pynchon continues,

as everyone knows, is nearly the direct opposite. Moreover, contrary evidence was all around me, though I chose to ignore it, for in fact the fiction both published and unpublished that moved and pleased me then as now was precisely that which had been made luminous, undeniably authentic by having been found and taken up, always at a cost, from deeper, more shared levels of the life we all really live. (Introduction SL xxxii)

With its echoes of Ralph Waldo Emerson's confidence that Man Thinking "learns that in going down into the secrets of his own mind, he has descended into the secrets of all minds" (AS 63), Pynchon's description of the source of authenticity is clearly a romanticization of personal experience and in this respect is similar to the romanticization of regional environments found in local color writing. For Garland, Austin, and other local colorists, the authenticity of regional representation derives from an organic connection to the environment and, even more specifically for Austin, to the land itself: "The regionally interpretive book must not only be about the country, it must be of it, flower of its stalk and root, in the way that *Huckleberry Finn* is of the great river, taking its movement and rhythm, its structure and intention, or lack of it, from the scene" (Austin 106). For this idealized connection to the natural environment, Pynchon

substitutes the similarly idealized notion of an authentic voice. The voices of his early stories strike him as “stereotyped and inauthentic” (Pynchon Introduction SL xxx), but by the time of “The Secret Integration,” he was “beginning to shut up and listen to the American voices around [him]” (Pynchon Introduction SL xxxiii). The primary connection between Pynchon’s work and local color writing lies in his cultivation of a voice of authenticity, first through the incorporation of local details in the form of accurate data and specialized knowledge and later in his attempt to represent elements of the “deeper, more shared levels of the life we all really live.”

Pynchon’s twin urges to incorporate the kind of information typical of local experts and to evoke a sense of universal recognition in his readers mirror the contending drives toward local and universal signification that for Petry define local color. Pynchon’s techniques in realizing these goals, which will be examined in depth over the course of the following pages, are decidedly different from those used by local colorists. For example, Petry cites the nearly complete absence of references to actual historical figures as well as the avoidance in local color stories of precise dates and “political and social issues” as a means of avoiding temporal specificity and thus lending a universal significance (120-21). Pynchon’s practice, in contrast, is generally to be exactly specific and historically accurate with regard to both temporal and geographical aspects of setting. Adding to the contrast in techniques, Pynchon integrates as much of the globe as possible rather than limiting the geographic locales of his narratives. This is another way in which he treats not only physical regions but all areas of knowledge as local in nature. In fact, the combination and extent of Pynchon’s omnivorous interests and his compulsive attention to specific detail has led most critics to follow Edward Mendelson

in classifying his writing as encyclopedic. As Mendelson's term indicates, there is more to his incorporation of factual information than simply a concern for verisimilitude. In crafting an encyclopedic style, Pynchon exaggerates both the particularizing and universalizing tendencies of local color writing. The emblematic regional details of local color writing become, for Pynchon, overwhelming catalogues of minutia; the localized but incompletely specified settings are particularized to a much greater degree even as they spread more widely across the globe. His narrators assume the role of encyclopedists, authorities on all areas of knowledge and native to every location.

Equally characteristic of Pynchon's writing, however, are his exploration of esoteric sources of information and his use of the patently fantastic—the various forms of psychic phenomena and the erectile plastic Imipolex-G that play major roles in *Gravity's Rainbow*, for instance. When Rhode says of the combination of romantic and realist tendencies in local color writing that “The wildest imagination and the scientific data sheet may both be legitimate sources for its literary material” (14), he might just as easily be referring to postmodern encyclopedic novels. Pynchon provides a memorable analogy to explain his efforts to resolve the tension between these opposing forces in order to combine “elements not normally found together” in an effective manner:

managing this procedure [requires] some degree of care and skill: any old combination of details will not do. Spike Jones, Jr., whose father's orchestral recordings had a deep and indelible effect on me as a child, said once in an interview, “One of the things that people don't realize about Dad's kind of music is, when you replace a C-sharp with a gunshot, it has to be a C-sharp gunshot or it sounds awful.” (Introduction SL xxxi)

Pynchon's attention to authenticity is a means of figuratively tuning his gunshots; the incorporation of specialized information provides the reliable background against which these gunshots explode but with which they simultaneously harmonize.

The idea of the C-sharp gunshot and its inherent dichotomy leads back to the questions concerning the nature of authenticity and the means of representing it suggested by Ammons and Rohy's account of local color. Pynchon's narratives, like local color stories, figure their authenticity by implying a synecdochical relationship with the world of which they are part. To suggest this relationship, Pynchon constructs his novels along the lines of a Spike Jones song. The incorporation of encyclopedic detail creates the narrative equivalent of Jones's orchestral background. In treating the global as local, Pynchon must exaggerate the attention to specific detail found in local color. In order to set off the narrative equivalent of gunshots against this background, Pynchon carefully establishes the authority of his narrators: not just anyone can get away with playing Spike Jones's music. Through a mixture of mastery and self-parody, Pynchon "earns the suspension of our disbelief" (HEV 47) and establishes a conditional authority for his narrators, who deploy their authority in order to authenticate the fantastic elements of Pynchon's plots—the metaphorical tuning of narrative gunshots. The narrators' authenticating voices are supplemented by the novels' structures. In *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon*, Pynchon creates a frame of authenticity around the events of each novel, similar to the frequent use of frame devices found in local color stories. Pynchon's frames provide a formal context, in conjunction with the background created by his encyclopedic style, against which events of a singular nature can be represented as authentic. In a paradox reflective of the nature of synecdoche, the events that mark the

edges of these frames, like Spike Jones's gunshots, underscore their own artificiality. As a result, Pynchon's novels offer themselves simultaneously as artificial construction and authentic representation, isolated microcosmic part and macrocosmic reality. They are not unique, however, in doing so. An analysis of these devices in *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon* reveals similar attempts to create frames of authenticity in a number of the other novels that are consistently classified as chief examples of postmodern encyclopedic narratives. As the encyclopedic style provides the foundation for these frames, a discussion of the style will serve to introduce an examination of the techniques Pynchon employs in representing authenticity.

Endnotes

1. I follow the standard practice in Pynchon criticism of indicating my omissions with bracketed ellipses to distinguish them from Pynchon's own frequent use of ellipses, which remain unbracketed.

Chapter 2

Encyclopedism and Authority

The term “encyclopedic” is no longer the mere adjective it was a half-century ago; it has grown from simple modifier into a part of the technical, even theoretical, jargon of literary criticism. Most significant to the term’s currency, particularly in the context of Thomas Pynchon’s work, is its usefulness in describing an important trend in the wide range of writing that falls under the label of postmodernist literature. As Douwe Fokkema has recently remarked, “The whole notion of the dictionary or the encyclopedia is a kind of signpost of postmodernism.” John Barth calls this encyclopedic trend “maximalism,” and though he traces it back through the history of literature, he suggests that the recent popularity of encyclopedic or maximalist novels is a response to the minimalism that dominated much of twentieth-century literature. In fact, his description of the motivation behind encyclopedic novels reads as a provisional response to the contemporary incredulity toward master narratives that Jean-François Lyotard finds central to the postmodern condition:¹ “Among the opportunities of Postmodernism, for the novelist, is the quixotic revivification—with the right irony to leaven its pathos and the right passion to vitalize the irony—of that noble category of literature: the exhaustive but inexhaustible, exhilarating novel” (88). Before diving into the current critical denotations of the term, however, it is important to remember that on the most fundamental level, the “encyclopedic” trend in postmodernism connotes the sheer size of the books. Barth, Pynchon, William Gaddis, Salman Rushdie, Don DeLillo, and others:

these are writers who produce tomes more than mere books; their novels physically resemble the volumes of an encyclopedia and suggest that a significant level of commitment is required from the reader who would comprehend them, if not going so far as to proclaim the “very *unreadability*” that Hilary Clark describes as part of the actual encyclopedia’s attraction (“Encyclopedic Discourse” 95).

Size alone, however, does not an encyclopedic novel make; in fact, largeness, rather than a necessary quality, may simply be the most glaring. Size, after all, can be found as readily in the novels of Robert Ludlum and Stephen King as in those of Gaddis or Pynchon, but one would be reluctant to describe Ludlum’s or King’s work as encyclopedic in the same sense as Gaddis’s and Pynchon’s. The “encyclopedic-ness” of these writers, then, might reside in their use of postmodern literary devices, but while encyclopedism is clearly a strong trend in postmodernism, it is by no means restricted to the postmodern era; critics generally agree the quality can be traced back through the works of Thomas Mann, James Joyce, Herman Melville, Robert Burton, all the way to the Bible and other sacred texts, to cite only a few of the most commonly mentioned examples.

The encyclopedic impulse in fiction, thus, is not unique to any particular time or culture, and its essence is difficult to capture in a single statement. Encyclopedic fictions are often quite long, though not always; T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* is encyclopedic in its allusiveness, and Jorge Luis Borges’s short stories, which he presents as “notes on imaginary books,” self-consciously take encyclopedias and the encyclopedic impulse as their subject, eliminating the need for “five hundred pages developing an idea whose perfect oral exposition is possible in a few minutes” by simply assuming the existence of

such a book (Borges 15-16, 15). The catalog, the digression, the essay: these are a few of the more common tools of encyclopedic fiction; the ordering of knowledge, the innumerable fields of knowledge are among its primary subjects.

Joyce captured a desire close to the heart of the encyclopedic impulse when, in the midst of writing *Ulysses*, he told Frank Budgen, “I want . . . to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city one day suddenly disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book” (Budgen 67-8).² Joyce’s statement distills the ultimately unattainable goal of the encyclopedic writer: the desire to reproduce or capture completely the reality of Dublin in writing, along with the implicit impossibility of actually doing so. Joyce begins by construing the role of the encyclopedic writer as holding a mirror to reality and ends by not so subtly suggesting the writer’s position as creator on a level equal to God. The conflict implicit in Joyce’s description is necessarily one between the writer and God; from Joyce’s point of view, Dublin’s hypothetical sudden disappearance from the earth, like that of Sodom and Gomorrah, could only be caused by God. However, in Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, this possibility has been replaced by the much more likely event of human beings erasing their own cities through nuclear annihilation. With this possibility literally and metaphorically hanging over one’s head throughout, the novel offers itself as a pre-emptive reconstruction of the culture that gave birth to this destructive power.

Implicit in Joyce’s desire are the desires common to all encyclopedic writers: to reproduce a textual world as complete and thus as real as the actual world; second, to capture the actual world in a picture, forever frozen in time; finally, to approach the idea of the book itself no longer as a reproduction but as the true or ideal reality from which

the world is reconstructed, the artist's ultimate revenge for Book X of the *Republic*.

Joyce's comment anticipates "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," one of Borges's best known stories, in which the study of a fictional encyclopedia overtakes and replaces the study of reality. However, the desire Joyce expresses is unattainable in the end. An erased Dublin could not, of course, be reconstructed from his novel; encyclopedists can never give a truly complete picture, can never completely capture a moment or place—though they can certainly try.

The Encyclopedic Impulse in Literature

The discussion of encyclopedism in contemporary literary criticism begins with Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, in which Frye concludes his analysis of literary prose genres with the encyclopedic form. Frye's paradigmatic example of encyclopedic literature is the Bible; the characteristics which define its encyclopedism are its construction of smaller episodes into "a unified continuity . . . as a work of fiction, as a definitive myth extending over time and space, over invisible and visible orders of reality" and the "cyclical movements" of its many thematic levels (325, 316). These cycles come in four forms: movements from birth to death, with the progression from God's creation of the cosmos to the apocalypse at one extreme, containing within it the many other cycles of life all the way down to the "all too human' cycle, the *mere* cycle of human life" at the opposite extreme (Frye 317); the epic structures of wrath and return (associated with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, respectively) (Frye 317); and what Frye calls the "contrast-epic," in which a real manifestation of human life is measured against an ideal (associated with "the epic of Gilgamesh") (317). In its attempt to contain the entire

creation, the encyclopedic form and the Bible in particular approach the limits of literary prose; following his discussion of encyclopedic forms, Frye moves on to non-literary prose (326). Frye's book, published in 1957, does not cover the many encyclopedic works of recent postmodern fiction; he cites *Finnegans Wake* as the foremost contemporary example of encyclopedic fiction, with a thematic unity similar to that of the Bible and far exceeding that of *Ulysses*, which Frye classifies as an example of a similar form, the Menippean satire or anatomy (314).

More recently, Ronald T. Swigger finds the metafictional turn of postmodern literature analogous to a tradition of self-consciousness found in encyclopedic literature (353). Using Frye's discussions of encyclopedism and Menippean satire in conjunction with Bakhtin's treatment of the latter as his starting point, Swigger examines several examples of nineteenth- and twentieth-century encyclopedic fiction, each of which also simultaneously parodies encyclopedism, and concludes that "In encyclopedism, literature makes its claim to the best expression, however critical, of the experience of knowledge, in whatever guise: 'information,' technical expertise, erudition, or [Hermann] Broch's *Erkenntnis* [genuine perception]" (364). While Swigger implicitly recognizes the encyclopedic quality of Pynchon's fiction, his brief attempt to elucidate this quality is ambiguous. Citing *Gravity's Rainbow* in one breath as the paradigmatic example of how "The search for knowledge seems inevitably to be matter for parody in contemporary literature," Swigger in the next puts Pynchon first in his list of authors "for whom the vigor and the Rabelaisian gusto of learning and expert elaboration are still vital aspects of literature" (353). However, Swigger more clearly identifies the defining quality of encyclopedism as "the drive for comprehensiveness which is a natural concomitant of the

poet's impatience for perception" (353). Though often the target of parody in contemporary fiction, this drive places literature, encyclopedic literature in particular, foremost among human efforts to comprehend reality (Swigger 364).

The most extensive treatment of encyclopedism in fiction comes from Hilary Clark in her book, *The Fictional Encyclopedia: Joyce, Pound, Sollers*, and her later article "Encyclopedic Discourse." Clark identifies an encyclopedic mode of writing that extends across genres and looks to factual encyclopedias themselves to illuminate encyclopedic fiction, finding the paradoxes of the former reflected as well as transformed in the latter. The encyclopedia always attempts to "incorporate new knowledge" (ED 96); inevitably, however, encyclopedism is "by definition a practice that 'encircles,' encompasses, delimits knowledge . . . excludes while including" (ED 96). Thus, the author of an encyclopedic fiction finds him- or herself confronted by the impossibility of completely representing knowledge: "in seeking to render knowledge objectively, the writer must make due with a project marked by ideological blind spots, with a knowledge organized by the categories of a particular culture at a particular time" (ED 97).

In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon recognizes and parodies this "paradox of totalization at the heart of the encyclopedic enterprise" in Brigadier Pudding's "mammoth work entitled *Things That Can Happen in European Politics*" (Clark FE 36; GR 77). Pudding's predictions take the form of a Porphyrian tree of possibilities branching off from the possibility that Ramsay Macdonald might die, a starting point Pudding takes as "natural" but that the narrator indicates is arbitrary: "Begin of course with England. 'First,' he wrote, 'Bereshith, as it were: Ramsay MacDonald can die.' By the time he went through the resulting party alignments and possible permutations of

cabinet posts, Ramsay MacDonald had died. ‘Never make it,’ he found himself muttering at the beginning of each day’s work—‘it’s changing out from under me. Oh, dodgy—very dodgy’ (GR 77). Pudding’s work parodies the sacred encyclopedic texts Frye describes in its attempt at prophecy and specifically in its invocation of the Hebrew word for “in the beginning” from the opening of the Book of Genesis (Weisenburger AGRC 51). Pudding’s comments also capture the ultimate futility of the encyclopedist faced with an ever-changing world of knowledge and the job of setting down on paper a clear picture of this knowledge. Actual encyclopedias both acknowledge this futility and struggle against it with the production of supplements, revisions, new editions, new encyclopedias, and so on (Clark FE 36). However, for the lone author, the eccentric, reclusive Brigadier Pudding, an encyclopedic effort must remain “dodgy—very dodgy.”

Clark also identifies several standard symbols which have traditionally been used to represent the organization of information in encyclopedias: the mirror, reflecting the inherent order of the universe; the tree, embodying the various branches, sub-branches, and so on of knowledge; the labyrinth, which represents the absence of encyclopedic order, and the map, which guides one through the labyrinth; and finally, the circle, the most powerful symbol of the encyclopedia, which Clark traces from the etymology of the Greek roots of “encyclopedia” (“circle of learning”) to the most recent edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (ED 99-102). Clark goes even further than Swigger, making self-consciousness about the methods and objects of representation central to the history of encyclopedias: “any text (fictional or not) that we would call encyclopedic must speculate on its own discursive processes of discovery and arrangement, and on the limitations of these processes, given the fact of time and change” (ED 105). Clark

concludes that “discourse becomes encyclopedic when it takes as its subject the process of knowing and the body of human knowledge, seeking to represent this body as an organized whole” (ED 107).

An initial consideration of these approaches brings to light several qualities that are fundamental to any consideration of encyclopedism in literature: such literature attempts to be comprehensive in its depiction of reality, incorporating larger and larger cyclical movements of life (Frye) as well as larger and larger circles of knowledge (Clark), while at the same time demonstrating and commenting on the impossibility of such a goal. Taking this as a provisional approach to encyclopedism suggests another useful emblem based on the circle, but one that Clark does not mention: the ouroboros, the world serpent, its tail in its mouth. In devouring itself, the serpent is emblematic of encyclopedism’s self-parody and the eternal incompleteness of the encyclopedic project; at the same time, in nourishing itself, the image literalizes what Barth describes as the “quixotic revivification” available to the encyclopedic postmodern novelist “with the right irony to leaven its pathos and the right passion to leaven its irony.”

In Pynchon’s work, the ouroboros figures most prominently in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, in which it is treated with both irony and pathos in the context of the famous dream which led Friedrich August Kekulé von Stradonitz to the discovery of the structure of the benzene molecule and the development of organic chemistry. While Kekulé’s dream is treated specifically as a harbinger of the late capitalist system of multinational cartels, such as IG Farben, that exploited the synthetic chemicals Kekulé’s discovery made possible, the narrator’s criticism is more broadly applicable to any totalizing system³:

Kekulé dreams the Great Serpent holding its own tail in its mouth, the dreaming Serpent which surrounds the World. But the meanness, the cynicism with which this dream is to be used. The Serpent that announces, ‘The World is a closed thing, cyclical, resonant, eternally-returning,’ is to be delivered into a system whose only aim is to *violate* the Cycle. (Pynchon GR 412).

Here, Pynchon’s description predicts the danger of any non-ironic, non-self-conscious attempt at totalization, the seductiveness of “Taking and not giving back” that leads “the System [to remove] from the rest of the World these vast quantities of energy to keep its own tiny desperate fraction showing a profit” (GR 412). In terms of the encyclopedia, the danger is one of an authority established at the expense of other authorities, the “single Version [. . .] proceeding from a single Authority” that Ethelmer objects to in *Mason & Dixon* (350). The awareness of this danger results in the self-consciousness of the fictional encyclopedic form in general and the dominant tone of irony and self-parody in *Gravity’s Rainbow* in particular.

The ouroboros figure of Kekulé’s dream takes the more concrete form of “the true inner shape, or Dragon, of the Land” in *Mason & Dixon* (Pynchon 544). The earth itself is the manifestation of the ouroboros and the Line is a violation of the world’s natural cycles. As Captain Zhang explains, “Ev’rywhere else on earth, Boundaries follow Nature,—coast-lines, ridge-tops, river-banks,—so honoring the Dragon or *Shan* within, from which the Land-Scape ever takes its form. To mark a right Line upon the Earth is to inflict upon the Dragon’s very Flesh, a sword-slash, a long perfect scar [. . .] How can it pass unanswer’d?” (Pynchon M&D 542). Pynchon provides an alternative to the

ouroboros in the Lambton Worm, an allegorical representation of the cycle-violating System of *Gravity's Rainbow*: "Around it [the Lambton Worm], a circle of Devastation appears, pale and soil'd, which no one enters, and which the World must keep shifting for, a little at a time, as it goes on widening,—" (Pynchon M&D 589). The Worm soon makes Lambton Castle the center of its "circle of Devastation," returning each night "to coil about the Castle, where it lies all night digesting loudly its day's predation," reenacting and travestyng the Castle's own exploitation of the surrounding people and countryside (Pynchon M&D 590). The Castle's practice of "Taking and not giving back" is seen in young John Lambton's habit of disobeying the prohibition of fishing on Sundays in order to take the "salmon-trout he believes his due" (Pynchon M&D 588). Thus begins the environmental exploitation that results in the Wear River's "conver[sion] to the service of the Christian God" and produces a countryside that "is thick with collieries, and pretty much given over to staites and shoots and waggon-rails" (Pynchon M&D 588). When he catches the infant Worm rather than the salmon he expects, Lambton commits a symbolic act of pollution as "with one of those knightly flourishes, the young fool, damn'd in the instant, actually tosses the Worm into the Well" of "Some tenant or something" (Pynchon M&D 589). Lambton's action produces a monstrosity that soon turns the effects of the Castle's environmental devastation back on the Castle itself. In contrast to Joyce's encyclopedism in *Ulysses*, which is focused on urban life, Pynchon's encyclopedism in both *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon* has an environmental focus; the earth itself forms one of the cycles he depicts.

Following Dixon's tale of the Worm, Reverend Cherrycoke suggests its possible source in "the ancient Alchemists' Tales" while Captain Shelby suggests, "The ancient

figure of the Serpent through the Ring, or Sacred Copulation” (Pynchon M&D 594, 595). In alchemy, the ouroboros served as a symbol of “an eternal process” (“Ouroboros”); here, however, the Worm appears as an abomination of the natural cycle the ouroboros represents. The Lambton Worm is “The opposite of the Uroboros . . . a case of arrested development (Kafkaesque ‘Metamorphosis’), something not fully transformed but painfully incomplete, unnatural, monstrous” (St. Armand 58). In this sense, the Worm represents the parasitic dependence of any totalizing system of authority, whether it be the Castle’s sphere of influence or the encyclopedia’s circle of knowledge, on the excluded region outside the circle; even the “Castle itself, the final sanctuary, surely inviolable” is vulnerable (Pynchon M&D 589). As the Worm grows, so does the Circle of Devastation: the System must feed off of the excluded regions; the “ideological blind spots” of a discursive system must be obscured. Any encyclopedic representation of knowledge is necessarily a simplification; the danger of the encyclopedia lies in forgetting this fact and mistaking the representation for the actual, recalling both Joyce’s desire to produce a text from which the actual Dublin could be reproduced and the public’s desire to “fall under the spell of Tlön” in Borges’s short story (34). In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Pynchon famously mocks the willingness, even the desire, on the part of readers to submit to a simplified, orderly version of reality. The narrator begins his description of how a minor character is washed overboard only to be rescued by a Polish undertaker in a rowboat who hopes to be hit by lightning by curtly addressing the reader: “You will want cause and effect. All right” (GR 663).

Clark acknowledges the prevalence of encyclopedic fiction in twentieth-century fiction, particularly postmodernism, and speculates that this is part of a larger epistemic

evolution that is bringing information to the cultural center (FE 173-74). Pynchon, according to Clark, follows in the twentieth-century encyclopedic tradition of Joyce, Pound, and Sollers; she finds this tradition “anti-creative” in that the writers construct their works by recycling pre-existing texts⁴ (ED 105). More specifically, Clark glosses the presence of supernatural beings in *Gravity’s Rainbow* as evidence of “the fictional encyclopaedia’s nostalgia for states of eternal knowledge” (FE 40), a nostalgia which continually struggles against the passing of time and the final inability of encyclopedia and encyclopedist to transcend time (FE 22-23, 39-40). This reading is compatible with the ambiguous treatment of the ouroboros as violated symbol of the “eternally-returning” in *Gravity’s Rainbow* but overlooks the extent to which encyclopedic novels such as *Gravity’s Rainbow*, *Mason & Dixon*, and *Ulysses* are immersed in the details of the narrative present.

Frye and Clark both trace the genealogy of encyclopedic fiction back to sacred texts, Clark by way of factual encyclopedias (Frye 315; Clark 39). The quality that most clearly separates encyclopedic fictions from the sacred texts in which they have their roots is self-consciousness. Sacred texts, particularly in the Western tradition, can and do offer themselves unironically as complete accounts of reality; encyclopedic fictions, on the other hand, as profane attempts at cataloging the creation, do so in the awareness that they are necessarily incomplete. The irony and self-consciousness that result from this awareness are more evident than ever before in postmodern literature. Even the rational organization of knowledge in the face of an absent deity that characterized the encyclopedic project of the Enlightenment was confronted with the inherent “temporal limitations” on their goals (Clark FE 23). At a time when the grand narratives of

legitimation have become so discredited that “there’s a feeling about that cause-and-effect may have been taken as far as it will go” (Pynchon GR 89) and knowledge itself has become suspect, the most common response in contemporary encyclopedic fiction is to leaven the pathos (present both in the form of sentimentality as well as in the provisional re-legitimization of knowledge that a parodic encyclopedic fiction necessarily enacts)⁵ with irony, to paraphrase Barth.

An encyclopedic novelist must first provide a foundation on which to build his or her irony; this is accomplished through hyper-attentiveness to period detail, a technique adapted from Menippean satire. Clark privileges encyclopedism at the expense of Menippean or anatomical qualities. The two are closely related; however, to adapt a spatial metaphor from the field of economics, the goal of timelessness usually assumes a vertical orientation in encyclopedic fiction generally and particularly in the sacred texts Frye identifies as the paradigmatic examples of encyclopedic literature; these works record the past, describe the present, and predict the future, uniting all three in a single narrative. In Menippean satire, the aspiration for timelessness usually takes a horizontal form, spreading over every aspect of a culture at a single point in the culture’s history as though to freeze that moment in time. Thus, encyclopedic fiction can also be described as diachronically oriented while Menippean satire tends to be synchronically oriented.

These orientations are not exclusive, of course. *Gravity’s Rainbow* certainly contains elements of both approaches, as do *Ulysses* and other encyclopedic narratives for that matter. Historically, however, criticism has tended to overlook the journalistic quality of both, a quality Bakhtin specifically links to the Menippean satire (PDP 97). For instance, Hugh Kenner points out that it was only decades after the publication of

Ulysses that several critics picked up on “the unexpected extent to which Joyce based it on the Dublin section of *Thom’s Official Directory of Great Britain and Ireland*” (U 2); similarly, in his *A Gravity’s Rainbow Companion*, Steven Weisenburger notes that the many minor period details of wartime London Pynchon gleans from the *Times*, from comments on the weather to shows on the radio to phrases in headlines, all add up to a carefully constructed plot that “enable[s] one to pinpoint the story time of many episodes, sometimes within the hour” (9). I do not wish to head too far in the opposite direction by over-emphasizing the journalistic, horizontal encyclopedism typical of the Menippean satire at the expense of the vertical integration of encyclopedic fiction; I simply wish to point out that these are two approaches to the similar goal of creating a picture so complete it becomes timeless. Weisenburger, in fact, uses his own encyclopedic compilation of sources in order to argue that the structure of *Gravity’s Rainbow* is circular, with its many subplots inscribing circles within the mandala-like four part structure of the novel (AGRC 9-11); this circular structure organizes the horizontal assemblage of data into a form that achieves the vertical effect of Frye’s cyclical encyclopedic works.

The most recent critical treatment of encyclopedism is Jed Rasula’s discussion of *Moby-Dick*, *The Magic Mountain*, and *Underworld*. Like Clark, Rasula looks back to the evolution of the encyclopedia itself; in this tradition he finds that “a conspicuous feature of the encyclopedic enterprise is that of a comprehensive book that writes itself out from under the coercion of authority and, by implication, releases itself from the charmed circle of authorship” (par. 8). Rasula traces this anti-authoritarian strain to its manifestation in fiction as the narrative device he calls textual or encyclopedic indigence,

a device consisting of “delay, meander, filibuster” and first seen in Melville’s Ishmael (par. 23). While he acknowledges the importance of the figure of the circle as an icon of the encyclopedic, Rasula differs from Clark in his identification of an alternative to the impulse to encircle knowledge that Clark sees as fundamental in the fictional encyclopedia. The alternative Rasula focuses on is the “long and instructive legacy of wallowing and apparently aimless circularity” observed in figures such as Ishmael, Hans Castorp, and presumably Tyrone Slothrop (par. 39). The indigence that typifies these characters offers itself as a means of resistance to “the utopian fantasy of total data transfer—a dream of unambiguous signals and noise-free channels” that has resulted in the contemporary conflation of knowledge with “the posture of immobility and confinement” (par. 7, par. 4). Rasula associates encyclopedic or textual indigence with the anatomy (par. 26); thus the texts he discusses also display the encyclopedic parody Frye identifies with Menippean satire (322).

Clark and Rasula begin their discussions with what is by far the most influential work on encyclopedism, Edward Mendelson’s development of the subject in two articles and his preface to a collection of essays on Pynchon. Mendelson’s essay “Gravity’s Encyclopedia,” published in 1976 in the first collection of essays on Pynchon, has long been a cornerstone of Pynchon criticism; in addition, along with its more broadly aimed companion piece, “Encyclopedic Narrative: From Dante to Pynchon,” it has become central to later discussions of encyclopedism.

In arguing that *Gravity’s Rainbow* is a member of “demonstrably the most important single genre in Western literature of the Renaissance and after,” Mendelson describes Pynchon’s novel as “an *encyclopedic narrative*,” and groups with it in this

category the *Divine Comedy*, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, *Don Quixote*, *Faust*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Ulysses* (GE 161). While problematic, Mendelson's generic classification is still quite productive: productive in that it is the first significant critical attempt to fit the many diverse qualities of the novel into a single framework; problematic in that Mendelson invents a genre that "has never been previously identified" to account for *Gravity's Rainbow* while ignoring the genre that Mikhail Bakhtin had previously called the menippea and that Northrop Frye had termed the Menippean satire or anatomy (Bakhtin PDP 92-100; Frye 308-314).⁶ In addition, at roughly the same time that Mendelson was developing his concept of encyclopedic fiction, Umberto Eco was promoting his theory of the semiotic encyclopedia. Menippean satire and the semiotic concept of the encyclopedia provide a larger context and a theoretical grounding for Mendelson's discussion of encyclopedic fiction.

Menippean Satire

Frye and Swigger, writing before Mendelson, and Clark and Rasula, writing after him, all note the close relationships between encyclopedic literature and Menippean satire while maintaining more and less clearly defined distinctions between the two. Bakhtin provides the best description of the Menippean satire, or, as he refers to it, the menippea, listing fourteen characteristics associated with the genre from its development in ancient Greece and Rome. These characteristics include an emphasis on comedy (PDP 93); a plot freed from expectations of verisimilitude, allowing fantastic situations in which philosophical ideas in the form of characters may be tested (PDP 93-4); an embrace of the seamy underworld of society that Bakhtin calls "underworld naturalism" (PDP 94); a

synecdochic reduction of life to its “ultimate questions” (PDP 95); a plot which moves among earth, heavens, and netherworld (PDP 95); experimental points of view (PDP 95); “the representation of man’s unusual, abnormal moral and psychic states,” which tends to destroy the illusion of an integral, consistent self (PDP 96); the routine incorporation of vulgar scenes and behavior, “mesalliances of all sorts,” utopian elements, journalistic topicality, and a diverse incorporation of other genres (PDP 96-7). All of these traits are combined “organically,” although Bakhtin emphasizes that the most important element in Menippean satire is the creation of “*extraordinary situations* in which to provoke and test a philosophical idea,” with plot always remaining secondary to this testing of ideas (PDP 97). Unlike Frye, Bakhtin does not describe an encyclopedic form and does not explicitly include encyclopedism among his characteristics of Menippean satire; nonetheless, the ability of the menippea to accommodate other genres organically makes it compatible with encyclopedism.

Frye, who prefers the term anatomy, gives a similar though less specific outline of Menippean satire and, like Bakhtin, notes an emphasis on “mental attitudes” and a “loose-jointed narrative structure” (309). Menippean satire and encyclopedic literature are quite similar in Frye’s scheme: the former are often characterized by encyclopedic erudition, usually parodically motivated, and the encyclopedic form can be found continued in satiric epics “in which every quest, however successful or heroic, has sooner or later to be made over again” (311, 322). In distinguishing between Menippean satire and encyclopedic literature, Frye offers Joyce’s *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* as the two foremost twentieth-century examples of each. The distinction is more one of quantity than of quality: both novels are marked by their “unity of design” (Frye 314); however,

the unity of design in *Finnegans Wake* “goes far beyond” that of *Ulysses* in its conflation of metaphorical patterns as well as the worlds of dream and reality and of experience and intellect (Frye 314). Whereas in *Ulysses*, Stephen and Bloom are contrasted with the archetypal figures of Hamlet and Ulysses on whom their actions are modeled, in *Finnegans Wake*, “HCE is himself Tristram and the divine king” (Frye 314).

Swigger approaches encyclopedism as an area of intersection between Bakhtin’s menippeia and Frye’s encyclopedic form; this area of intersection “speaks for and sums up the possibilities for knowledge open to humans” (356). Clark also notes the similarity and exchange of traits between the two genres while maintaining an indefinite distinction between them: “It is only when the encyclopedist’s love for topics begins to overtake the narrator’s desire to tell a story that we begin to cross the tenuous boundary separating the menippeia from the fictional encyclopedia” (FE 9). Clark’s contrast implicitly assumes another distinction between episode and digression which further clouds the question of whether a narrator is continuing a story or cataloging events. Clark only briefly pursues the differences between the two forms; for all practical purposes, the two largely overlap in her approach as they do in Frye’s. Rasula briefly notes the influence of the anatomy on *Moby-Dick* and cites the Renaissance form of the anatomy as a precursor of the present-day encyclopedia (par. 26).

Due to its omnivorous nature and its embrace of the contradictory, there is a difficulty in defining the encyclopedic impulse in literature that results in an inherently intuitive element in the aforementioned critical approaches. While characteristics are listed and generalizations made, there is also the suggestion that, whatever encyclopedic fiction may be, we know it when we see it. Thus, Frye suggests that “if we compare a

character in Jane Austen with a similar character in [Thomas Love] Peacock we can immediately feel the difference between the two forms” and argues that while both the Menippean satire and encyclopedic modes conceive of the world in terms of a dominant intellectual or archetypal pattern, the extent to which these patterns determine the form of the work is much greater in encyclopedic narratives (309). Clark similarly begins her approach to encyclopedism with an intuitive form of reader-response (“When we say that a work we have just read is ‘encyclopaedic,’ we usually mean literally that the work encircles or includes all human knowledge” [FE v]) and sees the “single intellectual pattern” that orders some Menippean satires as a trait that encyclopedic fiction adapts (Frye 310). Ultimately, the distinctions these critics attempt to make between encyclopedic fiction and Menippean satire reveal that the two are in fact quite similar and further suggest that encyclopedic fiction is best read as a form of Menippean satire that emphasizes erudition and in doing so greatly expands the scope of the philosophical ideas being tested.

The Encyclopedia as Global Semantic Universe

Before moving on to Mendelson’s concept of encyclopedic narrative and the specific role of encyclopedism in Pynchon’s fiction, one more conception of the encyclopedia should be added to those already mentioned. In semiotics, the encyclopedia, as elaborated by Umberto Eco, represents “the global semantic competence of a culture. Such a global representation is only a semiotic postulate, a regulative idea, and takes the form of a multidimensional network” (Eco SPL 68). The encyclopedia acts as a collective cultural database of possible meanings and associations for any given text,

smaller and larger sets of which are accessible by any given member of the culture, depending on the range of the person's knowledge: "local representations of the encyclopedic knowledge assume the form of a set of instructions for the proper textual insertion of the terms of a language into a series of contexts . . . and for the correct disambiguation of the same terms when met within a given co-text" (Eco SPL 68). Eco describes the structure of this network as a labyrinth in rhizomatic form, borrowing Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of the rhizome, and traces this structure back to Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*: "D'Alembert says with great clarity that what an encyclopedia represents has no center. The encyclopedia . . . assumes the aspect of a local map, in order to represent, always transitorily and locally, what in fact is not representable because it is a rhizome—an inconceivable globality" (SPL 83).

Eco's proposal of the encyclopedia as a "regulative idea" means that the encyclopedia is "potentially infinite," resulting in the possibility of unlimited semiosis (ROTR 24). This chaos of signs as a theoretical limit resonates with the theme of paranoia that runs throughout Pynchon's fiction. As a semiotic metaphor, the encyclopedia

does not deny the existence of structured knowledge; it only suggests that such a knowledge cannot be recognized and organized as a global system; it provides only 'local' and transitory systems of knowledge, which can be contradicted by alternative and equally "local" cultural organizations; every attempt to recognize these local organizations as unique and

“global”—ignoring their partiality—produces an *ideological* bias. (SPL 84)

Eco’s description of the semiotic encyclopedia places it squarely in the region of the excluded middle that Oedipa Maas finds threatening in *The Crying of Lot 49* (“She had heard all about excluded middles; they were bad shit, to be avoided” [Pynchon 136]) and that Pynchon explores in greater depth in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. The possibility of a middle ground of meaning between complete, transcendent meaning and meaninglessness is effaced in *Lot 49*. Having accumulated more and more evidence of local clusters of significance, each of which seems to be connected to the Tristero, Oedipa feels she must either accept the Tristero as a global system or deny any external, objective organization of information: “Either Oedipa in the orbiting ecstasy of a true paranoia, or a real Tristero” (COL49 137). The possibility of recognizing order in reality raises the same specter of paranoia in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, with paranoia, “the discovery that *everything is connected*, everything in the Creation,” opposed by anti-paranoia, “where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long” (GR 703, 434).⁶ In both novels, Pynchon establishes this binary opposition between complete significance and complete lack of meaning only to raise the possibility of “excluded middles” (COL49 136). The encyclopedia allows one to construct provisional meaning in local contexts of the universe of unlimited semiosis: “The encyclopedia . . . assumes the aspect of a local map, in order to represent, always transitorily and locally, what in fact is not representable because it is a rhizome” (SPL 83).⁷

Lubomír Doležel broadens Eco’s semiotic concept of the encyclopedia, first by interpreting it as “the shared communal cultural knowledge about the world, the cognitive

background of world-construction and world-reconstruction” (TESL 118), and second by applying it to the possible worlds of fictional texts in addition to the actual world: “the actual-world encyclopedia is just one among numerous encyclopedias of possible worlds. Knowledge about a possible world constructed by a fictional text constitutes a fictional encyclopedia” (H 177). While characters in any given novel have access only to the encyclopedia of their particular fictional world, readers can gain access to any number of fictional encyclopedias by reading (Doležel H 178). For instance, readers of *Love in the Time of Cholera* can incorporate the fictional town of La Manga into their encyclopedias along with the actual cities of Bogotá, Cartagena, Cali; the characters of the novel, however, have access only to La Manga in their encyclopedias since the actual cities do not enter into Garcia Marquez’s novel (Doležel 178). Readers’ access to the actual-world encyclopedia helps in understanding fictional worlds to the extent that the encyclopedia of a fictional world overlaps that of the actual world, “but it is by no means universally sufficient; for many fictional worlds it is misleading, it provides not comprehension but misreading” (Doležel H 181). In science fiction and fantasy, for instance, fictional encyclopedias quite different than the actual-world encyclopedia must be absorbed through the act of reading (Doležel H 178).

The semiotic concept of the encyclopedia reveals a further sense in which a fictional text may be encyclopedic, a sense that provides a greater context in which to address the complexity of encyclopedic novels. In their extensive incorporation of information from the actual world encyclopedia and the fictional encyclopedias of the many other texts to which they allude, these novels place a much more intense demand on a reader’s semantic competence than non-encyclopedic fiction. Furthermore, the

incorporation of knowledge in an encyclopedic novel itself becomes a theme due to the self-consciousness that characterizes the form, creating a feedback loop that constantly modifies the fictional encyclopedia of the text.⁸ Thus, the encyclopedic quality of *Gravity's Rainbow*, for example, can be gauged in terms of the extent of its incorporation of the actual-world encyclopedia into the encyclopedia of its fictional world or, to put it another way, the extent to which the encyclopedia of its fictional world coincides with the encyclopedia of the actual world and requires the reader to possess knowledge of the actual-world encyclopedia.

Joyce relies on *Thom's*, Pynchon on the *London Times*; both use hundreds if not thousands of other sources, both fictional and factual. One informal indication of this sense of encyclopedism is the availability of reader's guides or companions for encyclopedic novels such as Weisenburger's *A Gravity's Rainbow Companion* and the book it is modeled on, Don Gifford and Robert Seidman's *Notes For Joyce*. Of course, all literature incorporates the actual-world encyclopedia to some extent; the difference is one of degree: not all literature makes its incorporation of actual-world knowledge so explicit, so extensive, so self-conscious, and so much a matter of concern for the reader. In a useful if ungraceful turn of phrase, Eco explains that "texts are devices for blowing up or narcotizing pieces of encyclopedic information" (SPL 80). By blowing up or narcotizing, a text makes encyclopedic information either relevant or irrelevant (SPL 80). Eco gives as a simple example of this process the possession of organs by fictional characters, a property that is typically narcotized since whether or not a certain character has an appendix is usually not pertinent and need not be made explicit. In Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, however, whether Hans Castorp has lungs is pertinent and consequently

this property is blown up and made explicit (ROTR 23). Likewise, Eco explains in his extensive analysis of Alphonse Allais's short story "*Un drame bien parisien*," since the characters are human they are therefore warm-blooded, but this fact is never made explicit or blown up because it is not immediately pertinent to the story. However, while narcotized, the property of warm-bloodedness remains implicit since "were this property to be denied the reader would have to refocus his cooperative attention by looking for other intertextual frames, since the story would shift from comic to Gothic" (ROTR 23). Similarly, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, presumably every male character has a penis, but Slothrop's possession of a penis is blown up due to its relevance. In a more general sense, since encyclopedic novels take as their subject knowledge as a whole, everything is relevant, and information that would usually be narcotized and would remain implicit and unmentioned, such as the existence of a crater on the Moon named Maskelyne B, is instead blown up, forcibly incorporated into the plot and made relevant.¹⁰

Edward Mendelson and Encyclopedic Narrative as Cultural Anatomy

Mendelson's encyclopedic genre includes nearly all of the qualities Bakhtin and Frye ascribe to Menippean satire; however, Mendelson makes several noteworthy additions and revisions to these characteristics, differences that are more quantitative in nature than qualitative: encyclopedic narratives depend on synecdoche in their representations of knowledge (GE 162); they always incorporate a detailed description of at least one branch of science or form of technology as well as an art form other than literature (GE 164); they include images of themselves in the form of giants (GE 165); they are encyclopedic in their use of language and contain histories of language (GE

166). Whereas Bakhtin emphasizes the topicality of Menippean satires as a means by which writers “pointedly react to the ideological issues of the day” (GE 97), Mendelson identifies the recent-past settings of encyclopedic narratives as part of their larger prescriptive goals: “An encyclopedic narrative prophesies the modes of human action and perception that its culture will later discover to be its own central concerns” (GE 178). Most importantly, each encyclopedic narrative serves a nationalist function for the culture that produces it and that it in turn helps to produce (GE 161-62, 164-65, 172). While the characteristics which would distinguish Mendelson’s encyclopedic narrative from the Menippean satire are poorly defined and the attribution of these qualities to *Gravity’s Rainbow* appears flawed twenty-five years later, the relationship Mendelson describes between an encyclopedic narrative and the culture which produces it is relevant to *Mason & Dixon*.¹¹

Theodore Kharpertian argues convincingly that Pynchon’s first three novels should be read as Menippean satires; *Vineland* and *Mason & Dixon* can be similarly classified. In making his case, Kharpertian explains that Mendelson’s attempt at generic classification is “marred by a synecdochic fallacy, for Pynchon’s encyclopedism is not the essence of his narrative form but only part of a larger generic design” (14). Kharpertian is certainly correct in his identification of Pynchon’s novels as Menippean satires; however, at the risk of following in Mendelson’s “synecdochic fallacy,” I wish to focus specifically on the encyclopedic quality of Pynchon’s work. In fact, Kharpertian’s phrase is a felicitous one in that synecdoche is the dominant trope of encyclopedism, with the cetology of *Moby-Dick*, for instance, or the rocketry, statistics, and chemistry of *Gravity’s Rainbow* standing in for the whole of natural science (Mendelson GE 162-64).

Kharpertian underestimates the importance of encyclopedism by describing it as only one of several tools used in defamiliarizing the commonplace: “In Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, for example, the tendency toward encyclopedism in an unconventional fictional context constitutes, inter alia, a parody of exclusionary fictional ‘order.’ The satirical targets of such parody are the readers themselves, and its function is the renewal of their perception” (49). Pynchon’s use of encyclopedism is more complex than this. Encyclopedism is employed as an instrument of parody throughout Pynchon’s work; however, its use is never solely or simply parodic in the way Kharpertian indicates nor are its targets limited to the readers. One of Pynchon’s main narrative devices, in fact, is the self-parody employed by the narrator. In addition, a “central paradox of parody,” according to Linda Hutcheon, is that “its transgression is always authorized. In imitating, even with critical difference, parody reinforces” (ATOP 26). In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, for instance, Pynchon includes a great deal of non-parodic information about statistics, ballistics, behaviorism, and so on, even disrupting the text with a number of equations, in order to provide the background for the debate over the meaning of Slothrop’s erections.¹² Mendelson’s definition of the “encyclopedic narrative” is compatible with the larger framework of the Menippean satire but also usefully foregrounds the devices particularly relevant to Pynchon’s work.

The quality at the heart of Mendelson’s conception of encyclopedic narrative, limiting the genre to fewer than ten examples, is also the most poorly defined: the notion that such a work must play “a central cultural role” (161). From this privileged position, the narrative “render[s] the full range of knowledge and beliefs of a national culture, while identifying the ideological perspectives from which that culture shapes and

interprets its knowledge” and acts as “a fulcrum . . . between periods that later readers consider national pre-history and national history” (GE 162, EN 1267-68). According to Mendelson’s criteria, any given nation may have only a single encyclopedic author, but that author’s encyclopedic narrative may be spread out over a number of works, a qualification that allows him to include Shakespeare, one of those encyclopedists who do not “produce a single encyclopedic narrative” (GE 161). However, faced with the presence of both Chaucer’s tales and Shakespeare’s plays, he announces, “In England, the encyclopedic role is divided. . .” (GE 161).¹³ Later mock-encyclopedias and near-encyclopedias such as *Tristram Shandy*, *Gulliver’s Travels*, and *Middlemarch* are excluded “by their failure to occupy a special cultural position” (GE 164). In a bit of circular reasoning, Mendelson argues that since the encyclopedic role of North America is already occupied by *Moby-Dick*, “the international scope” of *Gravity’s Rainbow* “implies the existence of a new international culture” (GE 164, 164-65).

Further complicating Mendelson’s argument is the interesting suggestion that these central cultural texts “begin their history from a position *outside* the culture whose literary focus they become. . . . To an extent unknown among other works that have become cultural monuments, encyclopedic narratives begin their career illegally” (GE 172). This idea allows him to link a series of diverse conditions under which these narratives were written and published: Dante’s exile, the interdict directed against Rabelais’s work by the Sorbonne, Cervantes’s imprisonment and description of *Don Quixote* as “just what might be begotten in a prison,” the delay in the publication of Part II of *Faust* until after Goethe’s death, the general early lack of American recognition for

Moby-Dick, and Joyce's self-imposed exile¹⁴—though Chaucer's and Shakespeare's works again seem to be exceptions (EN 1274).

Having previously concluded his review of *Gravity's Rainbow* with the observation that it was “proclaimed a masterpiece within days of its publication” (PG 631), Mendelson is aware that portraying Pynchon's work as originating from a somehow illegal position will be difficult. In addressing this point, he admits, “Short of committing a crime, there is little a modern writer in Western Europe or North America can do, as a writer, to put himself in an illegal position” (GE 172-73). Writing before *The Satanic Verses* reminded the world of exactly what a writer can do “to put himself in an illegal position,” Mendelson construes the source of Pynchon's illegality as marginality and locates this marginality in Pynchon's “elusive near anonymity” and “*Gravity's Rainbow's* drastic violations of what remains of the tattered fabric of literary decorum” (GE 173).¹⁵ He further argues that while an encyclopedic narrative begins in an illegal position relative to its culture, “some years after its author sends it out into the world,” the book is assimilated by the culture in a Weberian process of routinization (GE 174-75). Presumably, this process is greatly accelerated in the case of *Gravity's Rainbow* since Mendelson is dealing with a novel that had been published less than four years earlier. Thus, in simultaneously declaring both the marginality and centrality of *Gravity's Rainbow*, Mendelson positions the novel and Pynchon himself in a manner Michael Bérubé finds typical of Pynchon criticism: the desire to make of Pynchon a “Romantic culture hero” requires “that the academic cultural center . . . [work] assiduously to establish a margin for Pynchon to inhabit, even when the effort has involved considerable strain” (290, 291).¹⁶

Mendelson makes the special cultural status of an encyclopedic narrative the key to his definition; this fundamental weakness in his argument results from his desire to differentiate between mock-encyclopedias, near-encyclopedias, and genuine encyclopedic narratives, with Pynchon's novel securely among the last group, the "most exclusive of literary categories," free from pretenders and impostors (GE 161). Differentiation on these grounds fails to recognize that encyclopedic novels, by their very nature, are mock-encyclopedias as well, a fact that is particularly evident in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Mendelson would restrict his group of truly authentic encyclopedic narratives to those works recognized as "*national* books that stand as written signs of the culture of which they are a part. The industries devoted to Dante, Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Goethe are not restricted to the academy; they are national industries as well" (Introduction 9).¹⁷ Thus, Mendelson suggests, the cultural assimilation of a text must be accompanied by the intense commodification of both text and author in order to be classified as a true encyclopedic narrative; the exact level of commodification required is unclear, though one wonders whether the marketing of Ernest Hemingway over the past twenty-five years would help him to meet the requirements.

At the time Mendelson was writing, the academic branches of the Faulkner, Hawthorne, Hemingway, and James "industries" were comparable to the Melville industry, but Mendelson cites Melville as the only encyclopedic American author.¹⁸ Hemingway in particular stands out here not only because the marketing of Hemingway as icon and brand name has been particularly blatant but more importantly because of the central cultural role Hemingway himself played, beginning in self-imposed exile, popularizing the notion of the "Lost Generation," chronicling this generation in his

fiction, and defining by example the lifestyle to go with it, all in the process of becoming a full-fledged celebrity. In thus capturing the *zeitgeist* of a particular American moment, it would seem Hemingway would fit perfectly the key quality in Mendelson's conception of encyclopedic narrative. However, it would be difficult at best to describe any of his fiction as encyclopedic, suggesting that Mendelson's placement of cultural status at the heart of his definition of encyclopedic narrative is problematic. Hemingway's style, to borrow Susan Beegel's phrase, is a craft of omission; as Hemingway himself explained it, "Anything you know you can eliminate and it only strengthens your iceberg" (Hemingway 235). Encyclopedic narrative works in the opposite direction, trying "to crowd and cram everything, all experience, into each paragraph, to get the whole complete nuance of the moment's experience, of all the recaptured light rays, into each paragraph," as Faulkner once explained in a turn of phrase particularly applicable to the style of *Gravity's Rainbow* (37).

Faulkner was contrasting his own style and that of Thomas Wolfe to Hemingway's; John Barth is even more explicit in constructing a similar opposition with himself at one end, Hemingway at the other. Concerning the historical research into colonial Maryland that informed his novels *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *LETTERS*, Barth explains, "It was a novelist's homework, not a historian's, and novelists are the opposite of icebergs: Eight-ninths of what I once knew about this region's history, and have since forgotten, is on plain view on the surface of those two novels" (FB 180). Pynchon likewise disclaims expert authority in the introduction to his collection of short stories, *Slow Learner*. With reference to his story "Entropy," Pynchon explains, "Because the story has been anthologized a couple-three times, people think I know more about the

subject of entropy than I really do” (Introduction SL xxii). At the same time, however, he emphasizes the importance of getting one’s information correct since it will be in such plain view. The opposition between minimalist and maximalist styles is similar in nature to Eco’s opposition of narcotized and blown up information. A writer following Hemingway’s iceberg method tends to omit or narcotize information, leaving it implicit, while an encyclopedic or maximalist writer (to use Barth’s term) includes and blows up information.

The impulse toward inclusiveness, the “display of erudition” that Northrop Frye cites as the Menippean satirist’s method of showing his or her “exuberance” (311), continues to be a common characteristic of postmodern literature, but of course it is not limited to postmodernism. Clark captures the intuitive nature of this quality in criticizing Mendelson’s overly narrow specifications for encyclopedic narrative: “Mendelson’s view does not take into account the great number of works that we sense to be encyclopaedic in nature. When we say that a work we have just read is ‘encyclopaedic,’ we usually mean literally that the work encircles or includes all human knowledge” (FE v). With this much broader conception in mind, Clark outlines an encyclopedic mode of writing that spans genres and displays a “drive to make the book comprehend all that can be known” (FE 35). Mendelson himself acknowledges this broader sense of encyclopedism in a later essay when he elaborates on the notion of “an *encyclopedic author*” (Introduction 9). In his original conception, Mendelson’s encyclopedic narratives do the work of cultural anatomies, though not just any cultural anatomies: he attempts to delimit a category of works which not only anatomize a culture but which in turn become monuments of that culture, cultural “capitols,” in a sense. However, opening up the

concept to include the encyclopedic author gives a much broader meaning to the term encyclopedic, a meaning more in line with Clark's formulation of encyclopedic fictions. While for Mendelson *Gravity's Rainbow* remains the encyclopedic novel *par excellence*, foregrounding the importance of the compulsion to incorporate vast amounts of information allows one to identify an encyclopedic quality that runs through each of Pynchon's novels.¹⁹ In this view, even the brief *The Crying of Lot 49* displays encyclopedism, synchronically in Oedipa's exploration of the many fragmented contemporary manifestations of the Tristero, diachronically in her tracing of its genealogy back to the Renaissance.

Gravity's Rainbow is both harbinger and product of the "new international culture" in which Mendelson prophesies it will play a central cultural role. That Pynchon does not, twenty-five years later, play a role analogous to Joyce in Ireland, Shakespeare in England, and so on, should be obvious. As Bérubé sarcastically comments in making a similar point, "There isn't yet an annual Pynchonian Award given out for the best published Pynchon essay, a Pynchon Fellowship for study at the Pynchon House in Oyster Bay (or the Lake District of upstate New York), a special Pynchon Conference at Cornell every May to commemorate the anniversary of his birth . . ." (298). It is clear that Mendelson, like many Pynchon critics and fans, both fears and desires such a role for Pynchon and that he in fact believes Pynchon's work does occupy a special position with regard to its culture; it remains to be seen, however, if the global culture of the 21st century feels the same way or if academic canonization can secure such a role for either Pynchon or *Gravity's Rainbow*.

While Mendelson's description of the formal traits shared by encyclopedic narratives is important, his placement of an entirely subjective assessment of the cultural positions occupied by the various works he considers at the center of his argument is neither useful nor tenable: non-encyclopedic authors have inspired the national industries Mendelson associates with a select few encyclopedic writers while writers who are encyclopedic in every other respect have failed to inspire such industries.²⁰ In fact, Mendelson's description of the encyclopedic narrative is much more useful when broadened to include the latter group also, those works which seek to provide an anatomy of a particular culture but fail to assume the central role of *Don Quixote* or *Faust* in their respective traditions. Expanding the definition in this way allows one to retain the more useful parts of Mendelson's analysis by relocating his genre of encyclopedic narrative as a sub-genre of the better known Menippean satire particularly concerned with science and technology, national identity, and the incorporation of all areas of knowledge. These qualities are the most significant additions Mendelson makes to Bakhtin's and Frye's discussions of Menippean satires and are also the most relevant to Pynchon's work.

Authority and Prophecy in *Gravity's Rainbow*

While I am unconvinced by Mendelson's attempt to single out a few select works that have privileged cultural and national positions, particularly with regard to *Gravity's Rainbow*, his effort raises interesting questions relevant to *Mason & Dixon*. Even if a decision on the status of *Gravity's Rainbow* as one of Mendelson's (inter)national encyclopedic narratives is postponed, it is clear that *Mason & Dixon* does not qualify, despite possessing many of the qualities Mendelson delineates and nearly all of the

qualities other critics associate with encyclopedic fiction. Besides failing to occupy a central cultural position, it is disqualified by virtue of being a historical novel set over two hundred years in the past. Mendelson argues that encyclopedic narratives are set in the very recent past, “about twenty years before the time of writing, allowing the book to maintain a mimetic (or, more precisely, satiric) relation to the world of its readers, while permitting it also to include prophecies that are accurate” (GE 163). Despite Pynchon’s continued use of an encyclopedic style and the novel’s clear ambition to embrace numerous areas of knowledge and vast amounts of information, then, Mendelson’s narrowly drawn definition would draw a clear line between *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon*. Reviewers and critics writing after the publication of the latter novel, however, have consistently grouped these two together in terms of importance, theme, and style. I point this out not to criticize Mendelson’s criteria but to suggest a modification of these criteria that will accommodate a text such as *Mason & Dixon*. Mendelson’s criteria are relevant to *Mason & Dixon* because Pynchon is clearly playing with the form. The novel should not be excluded from the encyclopedic category simply because it does not directly concern recent history, particularly when the Reverend’s history of Mason and Dixon within the novel, which is primarily concerned with event that occurred two decades earlier, does indeed fit Mendelson’s criteria. The Reverend delivers his tale in December, 1786; the main action of the events he describes stretches from late 1760 to Mason’s death in late 1786, with the events of the 1760s taking up the vast majority of the narrative. More importantly, the Reverend’s tale is set at a point in time that acts as “a fulcrum . . . between periods that later readers”—or in this case both

readers of the novel and the Reverend's listeners within the novel—"consider national pre-history and national history."

Mendelson associates the recent settings of encyclopedic narratives with the political and social authority they seek to establish. Through settings in the recent-past and the inclusion of prophecies that have been verified by the time the book is published, encyclopedic narratives seek "implicitly to confer authority on other prophecies in the book which have not yet been fulfilled" (GE 163). Mendelson's association of the prophetic quality of the novel with its setting in the recent past resembles Bakhtin's emphasis on the topicality of the Menippean satire. Bakhtin writes that in "pointedly reacting to the ideological issues of the day," Menippean satires "feel out new tendencies in the development of everyday life, and show newly arising types in all social strata" (PDP 97). Pynchon's technique in each of his novels prior to *Mason & Dixon* is to sacrifice a limited amount of topicality in order to investigate the genealogy of current ideological issues; even in *The Crying of Lot 49*, the contemporary setting gives way to Oedipa Maas's historical investigations and significant portions of the brief narrative are devoted to the plot of *The Courier's Tragedy*, a fictional Jacobean revenge-tragedy, and the history of the Thurn and Taxis postal monopoly, among other historical elements.

Investigating the role played by prophecy in a given text is perhaps more commonly associated with theology than literary criticism; however, prophecy is an important feature of encyclopedic narrative and its prominence shows the influence of sacred texts on the mode. Pynchon makes clear the importance of prophecy by beginning *Gravity's Rainbow* within Pirate Prentice's ominous nightmare; the dream's significance is magnified due to Prentice's proclivity for having others' dreams and the fact that no

source for the opening dream is identified. From there, the plot turns to various efforts, scientific and paranormal, to explain Slothrop's apparent ability to predict the location of rocket blasts; the early analepsis to Slothrop's Puritan ancestors introduces the themes of predestination, election, and preterition. Later in the novel, characters read various texts for signs, including "reefers," "whip-scars," and "shivers" (Pynchon GR 641), and the final section of the novel records Slothrop's metamorphosis into an Orpheus-figure and his subsequent dismemberment. Nonetheless, while prophecy is a central motif, the authorization of prophecies is less straightforward than Mendelson makes it out to be.

Prophecies about the future in the form of hopes and fears as well as dire predictions, though present in *Gravity's Rainbow* and Pynchon's other novels, are less central than interrogations of how the past has led to the present. In keeping with Bakhtin's description of Menippean satire as a "a genre of 'ultimate questions'" in which the widespread presence of the fantastic "is subordinated to the purely ideological function of provoking and testing the truth" of various philosophical ideas, Mendelson's "prophecies" can be read as referring not merely to explicit predictions about the future but also judgments on the present as well as on the different ideas that are tested in the novel (PDP 95, 94).²¹ In this larger context, understanding how the text confers and establishes authority is a necessary step towards understanding what answers, if any, it proposes to the ultimate questions it asks. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, encyclopedism supplies the authority upon which the various ideas and attitudes are tested, even as Pynchon simultaneously subverts this authority through the narrator's irony and self-parody.

The authority of the literal prophecies offered in *Gravity's Rainbow* is inconsistently undermined by the narrator's presentation. For each prophecy presented in

a serious tone, there are the prophecies which, though no less serious in terms of underlying subject matter, still manage in the ribald tone and flippancy of their presentation to undercut the entire notion of constructive commentary on the future of the world outside the novel. For instance, the fourth section, beginning as it does with Richard Nixon's "What?" as epigraph, turns much more prophetic as the narrative begins to look beyond the end of the war (GR 617). The Counterforce takes shape; characters begin to adjust to demobilization (with the exception of Slothrop); the Cold War lies on the horizon. The narrator signals the sibylline tendencies of the final section in the first episode when the image of Slothrop's harmonica in a stream leads to a quotation of the conclusion of Rainer Maria Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*:

There are harpmen and dulcimer players in all the rivers, wherever water moves. Like that Rilke prophesied,

And though Earthliness forget you,

To the stilled Earth say: I flow.

To the rushing water speak: I am.

It is still possible, even this far out of it, to find and make audible the spirits of lost harpmen. (Pynchon GR 622)

However, despite the oracular tone of the final section that this excerpt initiates, the prophecies the text offers are often central to the novel's parodic aims. Even when not explicitly parodic, the prophecies are implicitly implicated in the narrator's ironic stance toward the events of the novel. In this instance, the narrative voice is notably surrendered to Rilke for a moment, allowing for a level of sincerity of which Pynchon's narrator is incapable²²; in contrast to the earlier direct references to Rilke that were focalized

through Weissman and other characters, here the narrator is the source of the allusion and endorses its sentiment. However, even though Rilke's words are not the target of parody, the narrator undercuts the seriousness of his specific reference, the act of quotation in general, and the status of Rilke as poet-to-be-quoted by momentarily elevating the diction to a mock-pastoral voice before again descending to the slangy, Slothrop-inspired introduction to the quotation, with the narrator's "prophesied" taking the place of Slothrop's usual "sez." Lastly, the narrator's descent in diction, his refusal to be completely serious even in this non-parodic context, constitutes a form of self-parody that over the course of the novel comes closest to establishing any positive sense of narrative authority. The narrator is at his most reliable when he explicitly acknowledges his lack of complete authority.

The most obvious and elaborate exercise in actual prophecy, the reading of Weissman's Tarot, culminates in the narrator's ominous suggestion to the reader that "If you're wondering where he's [Weissman's] gone, look among the successful academics, the Presidential advisers, the token intellectuals who sit on boards of directors. He is almost surely there. Look high, not low. [. . .] His future card, the card of what will come, is The World" (Pynchon GR 749). As the narrator has explained earlier in the Tarot reading, "Weissman is 'covered,' that is his present condition is set forth, by The Tower" (Pynchon GR 747). Unsurprisingly, the narrator reads "The Tower" as phallus and connects it with the Rocket. However, in using the portentous frame of the Tarot to link Weissman with both phallus and rocket before warning the reader of Weissman's continued presence in the power structure of 1970s America, the narrator contrasts his earlier lighthearted conclusion regarding the development of a new weapon by the

Counterforce, two “gigantic (7 or 8 feet long) foam rubber penises” used by Roger Mexico and Pig Bodine in mock sword fights (Pynchon GR 708). “Yes,” the narrator explains, “giant rubber cocks are here to stay as part of the arsenal. . . .” (Pynchon GR 708). Despite the bluntness of the language, the presence of what Bakhtin calls the “incongruous word”²³ (PDP 96), the suspicion of a tasteless pun, the occasion which provokes this observation is as serious in its own way as the reading of Weissman’s Tarot. In this case, the narrator is describing the population’s gradual spiritual recovery after the war. At Mexico and Bodine’s slapstick performances, which draw larger crowds than the local British equivalent of USO shows, “There is a lot of laughter. [. . .] Seems people can be reminded of Titans and Fathers, and laugh. It isn’t as funny as a pie in the face, but it’s at least as pure” (Pynchon GR 708). On the face of it, this prophecy is simply ridiculous: people can learn to laugh again; “giant rubber cocks are here to stay as part of the arsenal. . . .” On further examination, the ridiculousness is a complex juxtaposition of two of the more prominent motifs in the novel, plastic and phallic symbols and, thus, yet another suggestion that “*everything is connected.*” The idea of conferring authority on the prophecy is irrelevant from the perspective of the novel’s encyclopedism; even as the narrator endorses the carnivalesque quality of the performance, the incongruity of his conclusion demonstrates the insignificance of the Counterforce’s efforts, and the ellipsis that ends the description of the cock fights dismisses them from the narrative. While the presence of gigantic foam rubber penises is amusing, the real giant cocks that are here to stay are the rockets associated with Weissman

When authority is conferred on the novel's prophecies, it is always simultaneously subverted by the narrator's self-parody, whether the prophecies are uttered in the solemnity of the Tarot reading or in the carnivalized setting of sword fights with giant rubber penises. In fact, even as the text displays an encyclopedic mastery of information, it subverts its own authority and, as is typical of Menippean satires, travesties the conventional hierarchies regarding the importance of information. When the narrator presents a prophecy as authoritative, as with the conclusion of Weissman's Tarot, the authority is established paradoxically by the narrator's refusal to be completely serious, his wink and nod of irony to the reader, as with his parenthetical commentary in the middle of the Tarot reading: "what, a dialectical Tarot? Yes indeedyfoax! [. . .]" (GR 748). The narrator even travesties the possible significance of the hymn that ends the novel with his direction to "Follow the bouncing ball" (GR 760). With this direction, the narrator places the hymn at the same level of naiveté as a movie theater sing-along, as though to admit that the lines which follow are overly sentimental.

In lamenting the debilitating proliferation of irony and cynicism in postmodern literature and culture, David Foster Wallace, author of the encyclopedic *Infinite Jest*, describes a condition he feels has become endemic among his generation of writers working in the shadows of postmodernists such as Barth, Barthelme, Coover, and Pynchon: "Few artists dare to try to talk about ways of working toward redeeming what's wrong [with American culture], because they'll look sentimental and naive to all the weary ironists" (147). The fear of appearing sentimental and naive is very much a part of the paranoia that Pynchon's narrator exhibits; Pynchon avoids the appearance of a sentimental or naive narrator in *Gravity's Rainbow* through the ironic subversion of the

novel's prophetic editorializing, in effect licensing the sentimentality ("It isn't as funny as a pie in the face, but it's at least as pure") through acknowledgment and pre-emptive self-parody ("Yes, giant rubber cocks are here to stay"). Bakhtin makes a similar point in his discussion of folk humor: "Laughter purifies from dogmatism . . . didacticism, naiveté and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality. Laughter does not permit seriousness to atrophy and to be torn away from the one being, forever incomplete. It restores this ambivalent wholeness" (RAHW 123). In *Gravity's Rainbow*, this equation works both ways; self-conscious irony licenses sentimentality, but the license to sentimentalize can also be earned. The narrator acknowledges the symmetry of this equation when Slothrop, early in the novel, holds the hand of a young girl who has been trapped under debris from a rocket blast for two days and gives her a Thayer's Slippery Elm when she asks him for a stick of gum. Before she is carried away, the girl kisses Slothrop's hand in thanks, "At which point she smiled, very faintly, and he knew that's what he'd been waiting for, wow, a Shirley Temple smile, as if this exactly canceled all they'd found her down in the middle of. What a damn fool thing" (GR 24-25).

Following William Slothrop's hymn at the end of the novel, the narrator's final direct address to the audience members, inviting us to sing along, can be read either as completely sentimental and naive or as overwhelmingly cynical. It is a "repetition with critical difference" (Hutcheon ATOP 6) of two previous uses of "now," the "most insistent word in GR" (Smith and Tölölyan 176).²⁴ In the final line of the novel, however, the markers of tone have been removed, leaving the reader with no indication whether the narrator's invitation is sincere or mocking. Much of the novel has been spent

deconstructing this kind of binary opposition, and the narrator's "Follow the bouncing ball" has already indicated that the hymn is not to be taken with complete seriousness. The final "Now everybody—" repeats the last line of a song that the narrator earlier suggests "you" sing "to the Glozing Neuter nearest you, even your own reflection in the mirror" (Pynchon GR 677). The narrator, in a parody of movie musicals and singing cowboys, uses a variety of typographical means to indicate the rhythm and tone in trying to sell the song, which ends, "Maybe we should stick together part o' the way , and / Skies'll be bright-er some day! / Now *ev'rybody*—" (Pynchon GR 677). However, the final line also echoes the much more serious tone of the previous scene, "ASCENT," which ends with the italicized insistence of "*Now*—" as Gottfried, inside Rocket 00000, begins his fall toward earth (GR 760). The italicized portions of each example carry opposing but clear connotations; however, even the comic song carries in it a deeper seriousness, as the narrator explains that members of the Floundering Four "continue singing for a while, depending how much each one happens to care" (Pynchon GR 677). By omitting such indications of tone in the final line of the novel, Pynchon does not insist on how to read this "most insistent word," instead leaving it to the reader to determine just how much he or she cares. He does suggest the possibility, however, of reading the final line as realistically hopeful rather than as sentimental or cynical, having earned this possibility through the dialectic of self-parody and, like Slothrop waiting for the little girl's smile, the seriousness of "ASCENT."

"ASCENT," the penultimate section of the novel, is focalized through Gottfried and describes his thoughts as Rocket 00000 is launched and rises to the peak of its trajectory; furthermore, the narrator significantly avoids irony, and "ASCENT" is one of few episodes

in the novel that is free of obscenity or blatant “indecorum.” The narrator’s only reference to Gottfried and Weissman’s sado-masochistic relationship is Gottfried’s romanticized thought of “their love” (Pynchon GR 759); previously the significance of this relationship has been consistently undermined by the narrator’s presentation of it.²⁵ Gottfried’s final moments also reenact in microcosm the scattering of Slothrop over the course of the final section of the novel, although the lack of irony and low forms of comedy in Gottfried’s case contrasts sharply with the narrator’s treatment of Slothrop. Both Slothrop and Gottfried are isolated and unable to communicate with others, Gottfried because he has “no radio back” to the rocket battery, Slothrop because people can no longer perceive him “as any sort of integral creature any more” (Pynchon GR 759, 740). Both characters experience an increased awareness of the physical world around them; everything becomes not “clearer than usual, but certainly more present” (Pynchon GR 759). As Slothrop’s connection to his past becomes more and more tenuous, his memories take the form of comic book-style adventures featuring Slothrop and friends as “the Floundering Four” pitted against his father, Broderick, the “Paternal Peril” and “Pernicious Pop” (Pynchon GR 675, 676). Gottfried similarly remembers his love for Weissman “in illustrations for children” (Pynchon GR 759), but the narrator neither mocks the form of this memory nor uses it to mock Gottfried in the manner that he mocks Slothrop.

Both characters finally begin to lose their grasp on their memories altogether. Unlike the unconscious dispersal that Slothrop’s mind undergoes, however, Gottfried is aware of what is happening to him; the incorporation of the direct discourse of his italicized thoughts into the narrator’s free indirect discourse emphasizes the pathos of the

scene: “the kind dog came to see him off *can’t remember what red meant*, the pigeon he chased was slateblue, but they’re both white now beside the canal that night the smell of trees *oh I didn’t want to lose that night*” (Pynchon GR 759). Having travestied Abraham’s offering of Isaac for sacrifice in Broderick Slothrop’s offering of his son Tyrone for Jamf’s behavioral conditioning, the narrator has earned the right, as it were, to present Weissman’s sacrifice of Gottfried without irony. Neither Slothrop’s disappearance nor Gottfried’s death is prophetic except in the most metaphoric sense—these are the effects of the Raketen-stadt on the individual. Rather than establishing the prophetic authority of these events, encyclopedism allows the “quixotic revivification” of the archetypal sacrifice of son by father by providing the foundation on which they are integrated into the rest of the novel.

However, while “ASCENT” is free from the irony and degenerative parody that destabilize the claims of authoritative prophecy elsewhere in the novel, its very inclusion implicates it in the larger effects of this destabilization. The seriousness of “ASCENT,” for instance, is subverted by the sudden and unexpected transition to the early 1970s movie theater setting of “DESCENT.” Just as the rocket, appearing as the evening’s first star, reaches the peak of its ascent, the narrative cuts away: “The first star hangs beneath his feet. *Now—*” (Pynchon GR 760). The abrupt shift to “The rhythmic clapping” inside the Los Angeles movie theater thus fulfills the prophecy with which “ASCENT” opens: “This ascent will be betrayed to Gravity” (Pynchon GR 758). Though this prophecy applies specifically to the launching of rocket 00000, Molly Hite applies the statement to the rocket in general in arguing that “The text inverts this formula and betrays . . . the gravity that counsels high seriousness in the face of ultimate questions about structure and

control” (100). The gravity against which “ASCENT” struggles, however, is not the gravity of high seriousness, but the gravity that continually pulls the novel down into the narrator’s cynicism and low forms of comedy: the ascent into seriousness is betrayed *to* rather than *by* gravity, a pre-emptive short-circuiting of pathos to keep the two sides of the equation balanced.

Encyclopedism does not serve simply, as Mendelson argues, to authorize the novel’s predictions about the future; a reading of how the novel undermines its own prophecies indicates the larger role encyclopedism plays. *Gravity’s Rainbow* is a novel that, to paraphrase Lyotard, expresses incredulity toward metanarratives as well as toward institutional and traditional forms of authority, even its own. The narrator refuses to offer any completely authoritative perspective. Two of the closest approaches to authoritative statements about the place of human beings in the world are displaced onto narrative surrogates, one in the narrator’s quotation of the historical Rilke, the second in his quotation of the fictional William Slothrop; even so, the authority of these references is betrayed to gravity as the narrator subverts their seriousness in his presentation. However, while the narrator’s parodic stance toward the culture he anatomizes requires that any attempts at sincerity or seriousness on his part are simultaneously subverted, the same parodic stance insures that the values he mocks are reinscribed: parody is always authorized transgression (Hutcheon 69-83). The authorization for parody comes from the text’s encyclopedism; the value of encyclopedism, though degraded through self-parody, is reinscribed through its extensive presence in the text.

The Encyclopedic Style: *Gravity's Rainbow*

Encyclopedism is not simply the inclusion of prophecies about the future, the incorporation of science and technology, or the metadiscursive element of self-consciousness. In *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon*, encyclopedism is a fundamental element of style present throughout both novels. Pynchon establishes his encyclopedic style early on in *Gravity's Rainbow* as an examination of a typical paragraph demonstrates:

Bloat is one of the co-tenants of the place, a maisonette erected last century, not far from the Chelsea Embankment, by Corydon Throsp, an acquaintance of the Rosettis' who wore hair smocks and liked to cultivate pharmaceutical plants up on the roof (a tradition young Osbie Feel has lately revived), a few of them hardy enough to survive fogs and frosts, but most returning, as fragments of peculiar alkaloids, to rooftop earth, along with manure from a trio of prize Wessex Saddleback sows quartered there by Throsp's successor, and dead leaves off many decorative trees transplanted to the roof by later tenants, and the odd un stomachable meal thrown or vomited there by this or that sensitive epicurean—all got scumbled together, eventually, by the knives of the seasons, to an impasto, feet thick, of unbelievable black topsoil in which anything could grow, not the least being bananas. Pirate, driven to despair by the wartime banana shortage, decided to build a glass hothouse on the roof, and persuade a friend who flew the Rio-to-Ascension-to-Fort-Lamy run to pinch him a

sapling banana tree or two, in exchange for a German camera, should Pirate happen across one on his next mission by parachute. (GR 5)

This paragraph is encyclopedic in a number of ways. To begin with the style, the complex stringing together of appositives, non-restrictive elements, and dependent clauses is the most obvious expression of encyclopedism. Though unexceptional for *Gravity's Rainbow* in terms of length, diction, and sentence structure, the paragraph is still complicated: Pynchon packs over two hundred words into only two sentences. Pynchon's style recalls Faulkner's description of his style; here Pynchon attempts "to crowd and cram everything, all experience, into each paragraph, to get the whole complete nuance of the moment's experience, of all the recaptured light rays, into each paragraph" (Faulkner 37). An important difference, however, is that in Pynchon's paragraph the emphasis is on information rather than experience. Each event in the narrative acts as a center of gravity that attracts information to it. In this case, the event is rather mundane, a transition from explaining who Teddy Bloat is to introducing Pirate Prentice's Banana Breakfasts. Rather than being mechanical, however, the encyclopedic style of the transition attracts more and more information, information which, far from being central to the narrative, amasses tangential detail after tangential detail until the details begin to gain significance from sheer weight.

Information accretes both synchronically and diachronically as the paragraph reaches across the globe and back in time. The paragraph becomes synchronically encyclopedic as it branches out to embrace the "Rio-to-Ascension-to-Fort-Lamy run" as well as Pirate's missions to Germany: Africa, the Atlantic and South America are linked to Europe, England is linked to Germany. These few details begin to show the extent to

which the war has penetrated every corner of the world. The encyclopedism of the novel acts as a textual manifestation of the omnipresence of the war. The paragraph also reaches back diachronically to the end of the 19th century and the Rosettis' circle and forward to the time of the novel's publication, drawing a connection between the 1940s proto-hippie Osbie Feel, his bohemian predecessors, and the anti-establishment culture of the 1960s. This accretion of information ripples backward and forward through the text as well. Pigs, waste products, drugs, and the decay of organic matter become recurring motifs, as do erections; the bananas are the first in a long line of phallic symbols; the narrator's list of the materials mixed together in the garden anticipates longer catalogs such as the layering of items on Slothrop's desk a few episodes later; the "glass hothouse" recalls the earlier image of "the fall of a crystal palace" from Pirate's dream and anticipates Slothrop's childhood memory of the abandoned mansions in the Depression-era Berkshires: "all the crystal windows every single one smashed" (Pynchon GR 3, 28); even a detail as incidental as the dead leaves falling into the soil soon returns. In the narrator's account of Slothrop's ancestors, he describes "every one [of them], except for William the very first, lying under fallen leaves, mint and purple loosestrife, chilly elm and willow shadows over the swamp-edge graveyard in a long gradient of rot, leaching, assimilation with the earth" (Pynchon GR 27). This accretion of information is encyclopedic in range and extent but more importantly in that it mimics the rhizomatic structure of Eco's conception of the encyclopedia. In the Global Semantic Universe that is the encyclopedia, "Every point . . . can and must be connected with every other point" (Eco SPL 81). Further complicating matters from the reader's perspective is the extensive incorporation of information from the actual-world encyclopedia into the

fictional world of the novel and the subtle mixture of information from the two encyclopedias.

The encyclopedism of the paragraph can also be seen in the subject matter and sources of metaphor. Mendelson observes that encyclopedic narratives include a detailed account of at least one science or technology; several such accounts can be found in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Although Mendelson sees this trait as particular to the encyclopedic narratives he identifies, approaching the novel as a Menippean satire leads one to view the presence of a particular branch or branches of science as a means of testing the philosophy of scientific method or empiricism in general (Bakhtin PDP 94); at the same time, scientific and technological data are among the many genres and styles that are absorbed into "the organic unity" of the novel as a whole (Bakhtin PDP 97). Following the allusion to the Rosettis at the beginning of the paragraph, Pynchon organically yokes together information from the two cultures of science and art in his references to "pharmaceutical plants" and the "fragments of peculiar alkaloids" they contribute to the soil. The reference to the Rosettis and the world of art leads to the more scientific description of the process by which the garden is fertilized, which in turn leads to the conceit later in the paragraph that compares the elements of time, the seasons, and weather to an artist, his tools, and his methods: "all got scumbled together, eventually, by the knives of the season, to an impasto." Pynchon returns to this conceit in the analepsis concerning Slothrop's ancestors that follows two episodes later. "The hand of God emerges from a cloud" on Constant Slothrop's tombstone, "the edges of the figure here and there eroded by 200 years of seasons' fire and ice chisels at work" (Pynchon GR 26).

The incidental incorporation of science in this paragraph contributes to the cyclical patterns of human life and nature that Frye associates with encyclopedic forms.

Finally, the image of the rooftop “impasto, feet thick, of unbelievable black topsoil in which anything could grow,” mirrors the novel itself. Like the microcosmic garden, in which waste products have combined with earth to produce the potential for fertility, the novel incorporates information digested from various sources, gathered on purpose and by chance to create a mixture, several inches thick, from which virtually any interpretation can grow. What it grows in particular is a fictional encyclopedia with a rhizomatic structure.

The Encyclopedic Style: *Mason & Dixon*

A passage from the beginning of *Mason & Dixon* displays an encyclopedism similar in style but which places less emphasis on vertically-oriented, diachronic encyclopedism. The first paragraph of the novel, only three sentences but over 330 words, describes the gathering of the young LeSparks for Reverend Cherrycoke’s afternoon tale; the second and third sentences of the paragraph offer an inventory of the contents of the room in which the various family members listen to the Reverend:

Here have come to rest a long scarr’d sawbuck table, with two mismatch’d side-benches, from the Lancaster County branch of the family,—some Second-Street Chippendale, including an interpretation of the fam’d Chinese Sofa, with a high canopy of yards of purple Stuff that might be drawn all ’round to make a snug, dim tent,—a few odd Chairs sent from England before the War,—mostly Pine and Cherry about, nor much

Mahogany, excepting a sinister and wonderful Card Table which exhibits the cheaper sinusoidal Grain known in the trade as Wand'ring Heart, causing an illusion of Depth into which for years children have gaz'd as into the illustrated Pages of Books . . . along with so many hinges, sliding Mortices, hidden catches, and secret compartments that neither the Twins nor their Sister can say they have been to the end of it. Upon the Wall, banish'd to this Den of Parlor Apes for its Remembrance of a Time better forgotten, reflecting most of the Room,—the Carpet and Drapes a little fray'd, Whiskers the Cat stalking beneath the furniture, looking out with eyes finely reflexive to anything suggesting Food,—hangs a Mirror in an inscrib'd Frame, commemorating the “Mischianza,” that memorable farewell Ball stag'd in '77 by the British who'd been Occupying the City, just before their Withdrawal from Philadelphia. (Pynchon M&D 5-6)

The description is primarily synchronic in its encyclopedism, providing much detail about the den itself and also placing the den within the greater world around it, from Second Street in Philadelphia, where one of the city's earliest markets was located (Lippincott 79),²⁶ to nearby Lancaster County, home of a large frontier population of Scotch-Irish Presbyterians (Hindle 462)²⁷ who play a larger role later in the novel, back to England, still the home of the Reverend's father, the children's grandfather.

References to the presence of “an interpretation of the fam'd Chinese Sofa” and the lack of mahogany further expand the scope of concern. The former, “fam'd” apparently because of the mid-eighteenth century popularity of *chinoiserie* and the inclusion of a design for a “Chinese Sopha” in Thomas Chippendale's *The Gentleman & Cabinet-*

Maker's Director (5, plate XXXIII)²⁸, foreshadows the subplots involving Captain Zhang and the Jesuit infiltration of China; the latter reference to mahogany, which would have come from another colony, probably in the West Indies (“Mahogany”), anticipates the protagonists’ time in Cape Town and the significant roles of African slaves in the narrative.

The description offers much less detail in placing the room in the context of the past and future, referring only in passing to earlier times and only as far back as the Revolution, and looking forward to the future only insofar as the description of the room could describe a modern-day Philadelphia recreation room complete with indoor picnic table.²⁹ In a very real sense, the past has been, if not erased, then at least disconnected from the present as the Reverend begins his tale. The year is 1786; the war is over; a new nation begins its history. The construction of the novel’s frame in the opening chapter occurs only a few months before and a short distance from where the new nation would soon frame the legal authority of its government. While the events the Reverend relates form part of the historical past, he explains from the beginning that “what we were doing out in that Country together was brave, scientifick beyond my understanding, and ultimately meaningless” because eight years after they finished the survey, the boundaries were “nullified by the War for Independence” (Pynchon M&D 8). This is not to say, however, that the past and future are not fused with the present in the Reverend’s narrative, but that Pynchon places less emphasis on diachronic encyclopedism than in *Gravity’s Rainbow* for several reasons.

The Reverend’s style of narration is fueled less by the amphetamines, literal and metaphorical, of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, than by the more mellow highs of caffeine and

alcohol. The Reverend tells a story not unlike the novels of Henry Fielding and Laurence Sterne; the narrator of *Gravity's Rainbow* monologues like Dean Moriarty. With its culmination in a present-day movie theater where “we” are watching the screen, “a dim page spread before us,” as an ICBM hangs suspended above the roof of the theater, *Gravity's Rainbow* insists on the persistence of the events it describes into the reader's future (Pynchon 760). It is the weight of this insistence—the book is the movie is the future—which leads Mendelson to stress the importance of the prophetic strain of encyclopedic narratives. *Mason & Dixon* contains less of the jeremiad in its tone: it ends not with the impending death of all of “us” in nuclear annihilation but with the death of one man in bed, not with the sacrifice of son by father-figure but with two sons' attempts to hold onto their father. The immediate future which it projects has already occurred, set in motion by the Mason-Dixon Line and played out in the Civil War; Pynchon thus places more emphasis on the Reverend's interpretation and presentation of history than on his warnings about the future. The many prophetic warnings the novel does contain are often from sources entirely lacking in authority, such as Captain Zhang and Squire Haligast, both possibly insane and certainly unreliable.

Encyclopedism again serves to establish the authority on which philosophical ideas are tested and ultimate questions are explored. In *Mason & Dixon*, these ideas take the form of interpretations of history to an even greater degree than in *Gravity's Rainbow*, in part due to its setting in the more distant historical past, but more importantly due to the presence of a first-person narrator who sets himself up as a historian and his tale as history. Pynchon establishes the encyclopedic perspective of the

novel in the passage quoted above through the figures of the labyrinth and the mirror, both of which Clark identifies as standard encyclopedic tropes (Clark ED 99-101).

The “sinister and wonderful Card Table” offers a visual labyrinth in its “illusion of depth” that the narrator immediately associates with the fictional worlds created by books; the card table is also a literal labyrinth of “hinges, sliding Mortices, hidden catches, and secret compartments.”³⁰ The encyclopedist’s answer to the labyrinth is the map; as both Eco and Clark point out, d’Alembert compares the organization of the encyclopedia to a world map that allows one to see the entire labyrinth of knowledge (Eco SPL 83, Clark ED 100). What follows when the Reverend begins his tale is the story of how a map is drawn and how nature is divided and classified into legal categories. When, after nearly five years in America, Dixon completes the definitive map of the boundary between Pennsylvania and Maryland, “Mason is able to inspect the long Map, fragrant, elegantly cartouch’d with Indians and Instruments, at last. Ev’ry place they ran it, ev’ry House pass’d by, Road cross’d, the Ridge-lines and Creeks, Forests and Glades, Water ev’rywhere, and the Dragon nearly visible” (M&D 689). Unlike Ariadne’s thread, which follows the contours of the labyrinth, the line imposed on top of the Dragon of the land destroys the labyrinth. Pynchon’s encyclopedic project wanders between the two extremes of destroying the labyrinth and becoming completely lost in it. Just as the children explore the hidden compartments of the card table, Pynchon explores the various pathways of history.

Clark argues that the “static figure of ‘the mirror’” implies an order already present in reality, put there by God and ready to be discovered by man (ED 99).

Pynchon’s “Mirror in an inscrib’d Frame” in the opening of *Mason & Dixon*, however,

emphasizes the inevitable limitations of any representation of reality. Any textual representation acts as an “inscrib’d Frame” by imposing an arbitrary order on reality. The mirror further signals the role of the Reverend’s tale as a “fulcrum . . . between periods that later readers consider national pre-history and history” (Mendelson EN 1267-68). The event the mirror commemorates was a party of enormous proportions given during the occupation of Philadelphia by British officers in honor of General William Howe, who had surrendered his command and was returning to England. The festivities began with a regatta and were followed by jousting, dancing in a ballroom lined with eighty-five mirrors, fireworks, and a sumptuous feast; the celebration, which began on the afternoon of May 18th, 1778, lasted until after sunrise on the following day (Scharf and Westcott 1:377-81). The Meschianza, as it was originally called, marks nearly the exact cusp between the end of Philadelphia’s colonial history and the beginning of its American history since within a month the British army had left the city: “It was said at the time that if Philadelphia was left to the ‘rebels’ independence would be practically acknowledged, and America lost” (Scharf and Westcott 1:384).

In its “Remembrance of a Time better forgotten,” the Reverend’s tale examines the national pre-history so “that there may ever continue more than one life-line back into a Past we risk, each day, losing our forebears in forever” (Pynchon M&D 349). The Reverend presents his tale as a mirror, or more accurately a reflecting telescope, held up to reality; insofar as the entire tale takes place in the confines of the den as the Reverend performs it, the mirror also functions as a sign of the solipsism of history. No history can provide an exact reflection of reality but must always reconstruct it imperfectly, leaving out certain elements even as the mirror only reflects “most of the Room.” In the framing

and writing of history, order is imposed rather than discovered; events are distorted as they are represented just as light reflected by a mirror is distorted, however imperceptibly to the naked or untrained eye. The LeSparks' particular mirror provides ample evidence of this type of distortion. The actual mirror it is modeled on, one of the eighty-five used in the ballroom of the Meschianza, is currently on display at the Library Company of Philadelphia (Lapsansky). The inscription on the mahogany frame, which was added well after the event, reads, "Mischianza—1778 / This mirror was in the ball room of the Wharton House, Philadelphia, at above date & on the occasion of above fête" (Singleton and Sturgis 559). Pynchon interweaves historical sources from the actual world semiotic encyclopedia and fictional counterparts to construct an elaborate fictional encyclopedia, subtly distorting the sources in the process. With its "inscrib'd Frame" around its reflecting surface, the mirror not only figures the novel's encyclopedism but also symbolizes the writing of history, the primary shape encyclopedism takes in *Mason & Dixon*. Pynchon uses encyclopedism to construct a model of the labyrinth that is reality; as the Reverend takes over the role of narrator, the accuracy and extent of this model authorize his interpretation of history within the novel.

Conclusion

The most useful approach to encyclopedism in literature is one that views it in the larger context of related genres, such as the Menippean satire, and related encyclopedic projects, such as factual encyclopedias and Eco's semiotic encyclopedia. The larger context I have outlined reveals that the many specific qualities that Mendelson identifies are part of the overall strategy encyclopedic narratives employ to establish authority:

authority in the simplest sense of persuading a reader to suspend his or her disbelief but also in the larger sense of persuading the reader to believe and accept the text's judgments, prophecies, descriptions and prescriptions about the culture it anatomizes. Having grown out of sacred texts, encyclopedic narratives are concerned with inspiring belief but are always aware of their own profane nature; as a result, they constantly face the problem of authenticating their claims to authority. In demonstrating their mastery of information from various disciplines, Pynchon's novels establish themselves as books to be believed in; at the same time, they travesty this status. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, this self-consciousness takes the form of the dominant ironic mode and pre-emptive self-parody on the part of the narrator. Paradoxically, by using encyclopedism to create narrative authority which he then subverts through his narrator, Pynchon succeeds in establishing an authority aware of its own limitations.

In its limitations, the encyclopedic authority of Pynchon's narrator in *Gravity's Rainbow* resembles Eco's description of the semiotic encyclopedia as a "local map" (SPL 83). A closer look at how Pynchon uses encyclopedism to establish authority in *Mason & Dixon* reveals a different method in which the narrator creates a space for competing versions of history by consistently exceeding his authority. Additionally, both Pynchon's use of encyclopedic authority and Eco's theory of the semiotic encyclopedia resemble the figure of the ouroboros. Pynchon's authority devours itself through self-parody, Eco's encyclopedia through its transitory nature and malleability: "every discourse about the encyclopedia casts in doubts the previous structure of the encyclopedia itself" (SPL 83). The two also feed themselves; Eco's description applies to Pynchon's novels as well: "In effect the model [of the encyclopedia] . . . supposes that the system can be nourished by

fresh information and that further data can be inferred from incomplete data” (ATOS 124). By providing a map that is only locally and temporarily valid—an encyclopedia—Pynchon creates a self-criticizing, self-generating authority capable of effectively reflecting and criticizing the culture it targets. In *Mason & Dixon*, Pynchon opposes the authority of the Reverend’s encyclopedism, an authority that should be provisional but whose limits the Reverend ignores, to legal authority, which always attempts to globalize and systematize its authority.

Endnotes

1. Lyotard writes, “In contemporary society and culture—postindustrial society, postmodern culture—the question of the legitimation of knowledge is formulated in different terms. The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation” (37).
2. While this statement is possibly apocryphal and possibly the product of Joyce’s suggestions to Budgen while Budgen was writing *James Joyce and the Making of Ulysses*, in either case it still vividly describes the encyclopedic quality of the novel and emphasizes the importance of the encyclopedic novel’s relation to the actual world, a relation often overlooked by critics who see the encyclopedic novel as concerned primarily with the fictional worlds constructed by other texts.
3. Clark describes the centrality of “the project of totalizing knowledge” to the encyclopedia: “The possibility of the totalizing circle tantalizes the encyclopaedist; nonetheless, this circular completion or ful-filling [*sic*] of knowledge must contend with the vicious circularity of desire as endless deferral. The desire to achieve closure on knowledge is the desire to write the one Book that will render all other books incomplete, obsolete, unnecessary” (FE 21).
4. Bakhtin makes a similar point with regard to the Menippean satire, which he says adopts “a new attitude toward the word as the material of literature” (PDP 97).
5. Linda Hutcheon explains that “Even in mocking, parody reinforces; in formal terms, it inscribes the mocked conventions onto itself, thereby guaranteeing their continued existence” (ATOP 75).

6. However, Mendelson does cite Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* as "the finest available introduction to the decorum of *Gravity's Rainbow*" (173). Also, in a footnote to his second essay on the topic, Mendelson explains, "I must point out that Northrop Frye does have a few pages on encyclopedic forms, but they refer to anatomies and Menippean satires, not narratives. Frye's cyclical and universal schemata make it impossible for him to recognize encyclopedic narratives which appear at unique and unrepeatable points in the linear history of historical cultures" (EN 1268-69). With the exception of *Gravity's Rainbow*, each of the works Mendelson identifies as encyclopedic narratives are mentioned in Frye's discussion of Menippean satires and encyclopedic forms.
7. Similarly, the first characteristic of the rhizome is that "Every point of the rhizome can and must be connected with every other point" (Eco SPL 81).
8. Eco stresses the fact that his proposal of the semantic encyclopedia does not describe an actual condition or even a possibility: "Since we suppose that, in the making and unmaking of particular semantic fields, the entire Global Semantic System is never completely structurable (and even if it were, it would not be structured; and even if it were structured, we could not describe it in its globality), we should assume that *only in theory* does each semantic unit refer to all others" (ROTR 83).
9. Eco's model of the encyclopedia "supposes that the system can be nourished by fresh information and that further data can be inferred from incomplete data" (ATOS 124).
10. When Franz Pökler's daughter, Ilse (or the girl Blicero has sent to impersonate Ilse) imagines someday living on the Moon, she selects "a small pretty crater in the Sea of Tranquility called Maskelyne B" for the location of their home (Pynchon GR 410). Pynchon foregrounds or blows up the presence of this particular crater on the Moon

because, as Weisenburger points out, this is precisely where Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin landed in 1969 (AGRC 197). Wernher von Braun, whose fictional counterpart is Pökler's colleague in the novel and who provides the epigraph to section one, headed the NASA team that sent men to the Moon. The man for whom the crater was named, Nevil Maskelyne, plays a prominent role in *Mason & Dixon*, first as Mason's colleague at the Royal Observatory and on St. Helena and later as astronomer royal.

11. For Mendelson the encyclopedic narrative and the culture it is associated with produce and reinforce each other: "the development of a nation's self-recognition, and its identification of an encyclopedic narrative or author as its central cultural monument, are also reciprocal processes" (GE 172).

12. Pynchon includes the Poisson equation (GR 140), an equation for the rocket's "motion under the aspect of yaw control" (GR 239), a mathematical joke in the form of an equation (GR 450), and a phonetic version of the equation for a Gaussian curve (GR 709). Similarly, in order to set up a baroque pun, Pynchon constructs the elaborate plot tangent involving children working for Bloody Chiclitz's fur operation and Chiclitz's dream of "bring[ing] all these kids back to America, out to Hollywood" to work for Cecil B. De Mille: "'Galley slaves?' Chiclitz roars. 'Never, by God. For De Mille, young fur-henchmen can't be rowing!'" (GR 559). See Weisenburger 240.

13. In "Gravity's Encyclopedia," Mendelson is unclear on this point; in "Encyclopedic Narrative," he is more decisive, explaining, "Encyclopedic authors can, however, be supplanted, if only rarely. Chaucer occupied the encyclopedic role in England until a peaceful revolution in the eighteenth century unseated him in favor of Shakespeare" (EN 1271).

14. The controversies surrounding the publication and distribution of *Ulysses* would be a more convincing indication of the novel's "illegal" status than Joyce's self-imposed exile.

15. Later Pynchon critics have certified Pynchon's marginal status by adding to Mendelson's observations the decision of the Pulitzer Prize Advisory Board not to give any award when the fiction jury unanimously nominated *Gravity's Rainbow* in 1974, the acceptance of Pynchon's National Book Award for *Gravity's Rainbow* by the comedian "Professor" Irwin Corey, and Pynchon's refusal of the Howells Medal in 1975. Michael Bérubé, writing after Pynchon's acceptance of a MacArthur Fellowship, notes that "It is possible . . . to overstate Pynchon's aversion to the official machineries of acclaim" (301)

16. Mendelson himself sees no such strain involved in classifying Pynchon as marginal and in fact takes it for granted; even as he makes the point, quite similar to Bérubé's, that the canonization of encyclopedic authors "is in part an aspect of romantic nationalism and its search for ancestors," he ignores his own complicity in the process and cryptically wonders "whether criticism will bother to listen [to *Gravity's Rainbow*]—whether it will perhaps become more aware of its own position and purpose" (EN 1275). For his part, Bérubé argues that critics situate Pynchon and themselves this way because it allows them "to position themselves, insofar as they take up the role of the defender of genius against the bulls of Bashan, as something other than academic critics," the most important of these other things being "fans" (293).

17. Though he specifically differentiates his encyclopedic genre from Frye's, Mendelson argues that the "persistent exegetic and textual industr[ies]" that evolve around encyclopedic narratives are "comparable to the industry founded upon the Bible" (EN 1268).

18. Mendelson's article was published in 1976. A quick search of the MLA Online Bibliography reveals the following numbers of records associated with each writer from 1965-1976: Faulkner: 1324; Hawthorne: 1060; Hemingway: 822; James: 1229; Melville 1207. Among other writers, T. S. Eliot is indexed in 1094 records, Walt Whitman in 730, Ralph Waldo Emerson in 561. The numbers are roughly similar for the years 1990-2001 with decreases of approximately 300 for both Melville and Hawthorne. Searches followed the form of "X n Y" where "X" and "Y" are the authors' first and last names and "n" restricts the results to records in which the two terms are adjacent (to prevent, for instance, an article by Bill *James* about *Henry* Fielding from coming up in the results).

19. "Compulsion" is an important part of encyclopedic fiction. David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, for example, catalogs hundreds of forms of addiction and obsessive-compulsive behavior. Wallace cut several hundred pages before the novel was published at 1079 pages; most of the deleted matter was from the endnotes (96 pages of endnotes made it into the final version), and much of it dealt with "dental trivia" (Stivers).

20. Besides the aforementioned Hawthorne and Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ralph Waldo Emerson generate significant academic production; the Jane Austen industry has been going strong for the past ten years. Much of the problem lies in deciding how to measure the "industry" devoted to any given author. Mendelson's determination of what works occupy central cultural roles privileges academic canonization. His conception of encyclopedic narrative does not account for a book like Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, which has developed an extensive national industry (not limited to the former Confederate States) and occupied a central cultural role since its publication that must certainly far exceed that of either *Moby-Dick* or

Gravity's Rainbow. Mitchell's novel reverses the process Mendelson's describes in its immediate widespread acceptance, only slowly acquiring an "illegal" status due to changing social attitudes towards its representation of African Americans and its romanticization of the old south as well as the novel's lack of acceptance in the academic canon. Nonetheless, the extent to which it remains powerfully enshrined in American culture has been seen recently in the controversy over Alice Randall's parody, *The Wind Done Gone*. However, though Mitchell's novel meets the most important requirement under Mendelson's definition (and also, in chronicling the Civil War, better meets the qualification that an encyclopedic narrative mark a defining national moment than *Moby-Dick*), few would classify it as encyclopedic in the same sense as *Ulysses*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, or *Moby-Dick*. *Gone With the Wind* lacks the self-consciousness of these novels and fails to take "as its subject the process of knowing and the body of human knowledge," suggesting that these qualities are much more fundamental to encyclopedism than the cultural role played by a text (Clark ED 107). Mendelson's academe-centric conception of cultural status also disregards an author like J.R.R. Tolkien, whose work has long played a prominent cultural role, a role that promises to become increasingly mainstream with the release of Peter Jackson's film adaptations.

Popular novels such as *Gone With the Wind* and *The Lord of the Rings* are not the only works that prove problematic for Mendelson's definition of encyclopedic narrative. The best recent example of an undoubtedly encyclopedic novel that has not played a central cultural role is William Gaddis's first novel, *The Recognitions*, which was largely ignored when published and is still only marginally a part of the academic canon despite

the fact that Gaddis went on to win two National Book Awards. The MLA Online Bibliography lists 104 records associated with Gaddis from 1965-2001.

21. In *Gravity's Rainbow* the testing of ideas is introduced explicitly with the conflict between Pointsman's behaviorism and Roger Mexico's probability, continues with the various interpretations of Slothrop's erections, and then proliferates throughout the different narrative strands.

22. As Weisenburger points out, however, the narrative voice is also notably not surrendered to the translator: "while the copyright pages to *GR* specify the Norton edition for translations of Rilke, here Pynchon cribs his own version. . . . In several respects Pynchon's is the better and more interesting translation" (AGRC 267). In particular, Weisenburger approves of Pynchon's use of "rushing," which "preserves the onomatopoeic sibilance" of the original (AGRC 267). Pynchon echoes his own translation and again uses the Rilke image as justification for simplicity and sentimentality when Tchitcherine later eats Geli Tripping's magic bread: "He takes the bread now. The stream rushes. A bird sings" (GR 734). Immediately following, when Tchitcherine fails to recognize his half-brother Enzian, whom he has been maniacally pursuing throughout, the narrator acknowledges the improbability while insisting on the possibility of the event: "This is magic. Sure—but not necessarily fantasy. Certainly not the first time a man has passed his brother by, at the edge of the evening, often forever, without knowing it" (Pynchon GR 735).

23. Menippean satires are characterized by "all violations of the generally accepted, ordinary course of events and the established norms of behavior and etiquette, including the verbal" (Bakhtin PDP 96). These carnivalistic elements form "a breach in the stable,

normal ('seemly') course of human affairs and events and free human behavior from predetermining norms and motivations" (Bakhtin PDP 96).

24. Marcus Smith and Khachig Tölölyan provide an extremely important reading of *Gravity's Rainbow* in the tradition of the Puritan jeremiad and identify several "typical jeremiad figures" in William Slothrop's hymn (170). In the last line of the novel, they see a synchronization of the horological and chronometric time scales "analogous to that which [Sacvan] Bercovitch locates in the old jeremiads" (Smith and Tölölyan 180).

25. In the previous scene involving Gottfried and Blicero, for instance: "Will Blicero die *no please don't let him die*. . . . (But he will.) "You're going to survive me," he [Blicero] whispers. Gottfried kneels at his feet, wearing the dog collar" (Pynchon GR 721).

26. In early Philadelphia, "the daily life of the town was focussed at the old Provincial Hall in the market place at Second and High Streets [later called Market Street]. Here was the Jail and here were those much dreaded but effective instruments of correction—the Pillory, Stocks and Whipping Post" (Lippincott 78-79). In *Mason & Dixon*, Pynchon writes, "Cities begin upon the day the Walls of the Shambles go up, to screen away Blood and Blood-letting [. . .]. The Veery Brothers, professional effigy makers, run an establishment south of the Shambles at Second and Market Streets, by the Court House" (289).

27. In his introduction to *The Paxton Papers*, John R. Dunbar questions the accuracy of describing the frontier people of Lancaster County as Scotch-Irish and Presbyterian but decides to follow "long established habit" in the case of the former and "to abide by the contemporary accounts and use Presbyterian as the denominational label for the Paxton Boys" in the case of the latter (3). Thus, while many of the people on the frontier were

neither Scotch-Irish nor Presbyterian, the use of these labels at the time has continued into the present.

28. Chippendale's *Director* was owned by the Library Company of Philadelphia and "was the source of the designs of many of Philadelphia's master craftsmen," a number of whom were library members (Wolf and Korey 29). Later, when Mason and Dixon first meet with the Boundary Line Commissioners, they sit in "two Chairs of ordinary Second Street origin and faux-Chippendale carving" (Pynchon M&D 291).

29. An example of the type of Pennsylvania sawbuck trestle table or Swedish table upon which the "long scarr'd sawbuck table" in the LeSparks' den is modeled can be found in Franklin H. Gottshall's *How to Make Colonial Furniture* (74).

30. While Pynchon's elaborate card table would be at home in a Charles Brockden Brown novel, even a less elaborate version would have been rare in Philadelphia in the 1780s. A Philadelphia card table with a hidden drawer and dated 1760-1780 is pictured in Joseph Downs's *American Furniture in the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum*. Of this table, Downs writes, "A concealed drawer behind the swinging rear leg is a rare feature in Philadelphia, although customary in New York tables. Among known tables, only the Cadwalader paw-foot card table has a similar secret drawer" (figure 345).

Chapter 3

“A Representation of Authority”: The Role of the Narrator

. . . [N]arrative in general, from the folktale to the novel, from the annals to the fully realized “history,” has to do with the topics of the law, legality, legitimacy, or, more generally, authority.—Hayden White

Shortly after Mason and Dixon’s second departure from England to observe the Transit of Venus, Dixon remarks that his clothes, “this Coat, Hat, and Breeches of unmistakably military color and cut,” as Mason describes them, have been chosen “Upon the theory that a Representation of Authority, whose extent no one is quite sure of, may act as a deterrent to Personal Assault” (Pynchon M&D 49). In fact, Dixon’s clothing, particularly his red coat, proves most effective at attracting attention, and this attention often threatens to lead to the assault the coat is intended to deter. Aware of this possibility, Dixon later opts for a disguise of sorts when he visits the jail in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where the massacre of Indians occurred the previous year. Dixon rides to the jail “wearing a Hat and Coat borrow’d of Mason. He is going as Mason” (Pynchon M&D 347). Mason’s attire, of course, is the opposite of Dixon’s; at their first meeting, Dixon “is amus’d at Mason’s nearly invisible Turn-out, all in Snuffs and Buffs and Grays” (Pynchon M&D 17). The extremes of fashion observed in the two protagonists are similar in nature to the extreme positions that the Reverend Cherrycoke oscillates

between as narrator. Arraying himself one moment with “a Representation of Authority, whose extent no one is quite sure of” and effacing himself the next with a “nearly invisible Turn-out,” the Reverend narrates his story in a less confrontational though no less controlling manner than the narrator of *Gravity’s Rainbow*.

Like Dixon, the Reverend consciously takes on a role in presenting himself as narrator. Both characters possess actual authority, of course: Dixon possesses deontic authority as Co-Adjutor of the boundary line survey (i.e. he is *in* authority); the Reverend possesses epistemic authority as an expert on the lives of Mason and Dixon (i.e. he is *an* authority) (De George 78). In Dixon’s appearance and the Reverend’s reportage of events of which he has no knowledge, however, both characters suggest that their authority extends beyond what is warranted by reality. Like all of the characters in *Mason & Dixon*, they are actors portraying roles and are aware of themselves as doing so. The force of their authority, that is, whether or not their representations are successful, lies in the efficacy of their performances; in effectively performing the roles they adopt, they are comparable to “Mr. Garrick, who in ‘representing’ a rôle, becomes the character, as by some transfer of Soul” (Pynchon M&D 405). Rather than making it easier to determine the extent of the characters’ authority, however, their awareness of playing roles contributes to the epistemological uncertainty of the novel. The younger J. Wade LeSpark captures this uncertainty when he speculates on the source of the inverted star on the rifle Mason and Dixon find at the Lepton Ridotto: “there remains a standing Quarrel, as to what Rifle may have serv’d as the Model,—that is, if any at all did,—too much, out here, failing to mark the Boundaries between Reality and Representation” (Pynchon

M&D 429). The same Quarrel is relevant to the Reverend's narrative as a whole: what, if any, actual events serve as its model?

The question of the boundary between real and representation, between factual and fictive is particularly important with regard to the Reverend. As narrator of the embedded story of Mason and Dixon, the Reverend controls the reader's access to and knowledge of the characters whose actions make up the main concern of the novel. The events in the lives of these characters serve as the model for the Reverend's narrative; furthermore, he establishes himself as an epistemic authority on these events through knowledge both direct and indirect that he has gathered in his journal and supplemented through further research. Despite all of this, however, the extent to which the events of the Reverend's narrative correspond with their historical models is ambiguous at best. The Reverend uses his authority to suggest that the correspondence is complete; several of his listeners question this suggestion; the reader, whether suspicious or not, is left to decide how to make sense of the Reverend's narrative: whether as fantasy, history, or something in between. Determining how to classify the Reverend's narrative is largely a function of how one assesses his authority.

Historian Hayden White points out that "In the eighteenth century, thinkers conventionally distinguished among three kinds of historiography: fabulous, true, and satirical" (M 49). Historians of the time, White argues, felt that history of the fabulous type "was beneath contempt, unfit for a scholar to write or a serious man to read. Truth was what the historian dealt in, and nothing but the truth—so the theory ran" (M 49).

White's description of the historian's role is supported by the writing of Hugh Blair, the

most influential English rhetorician of the Enlightenment, whose *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* were published in 1783:

As it is the office of an orator to persuade, it is that of an historian to record truth for the instruction of mankind. . . . As the primary end of history is to record truth,—impartiality, fidelity, and accuracy, are the fundamental qualities of an historian. He must neither be a panegyrist, nor a satirist. He must not enter into faction, nor give scope to affection: but, contemplating past events and characters with a cool and dispassionate eye, must present to his readers a faithful copy of human nature. (394; lect. 35)

The Reverend's story of Mason and Dixon clearly falls outside the mainstream of conventional 18th century history; just as clearly the Reverend himself fails to meet the qualities Blair identifies as fundamental. In blurring the lines between fable, history, and satire, however, the Reverend still seeks to provide "a faithful copy of human nature." The stories he tells comprise "an Herodotic Web of Adventures and Curiosities selected, the Rev^d implies, for their moral usefulness, whilst avoiding others not as suitable in the Hearing of Youth" (Pynchon M&D 7). These stories can more accurately be classified as examples of one of "the inferior kinds of historical composition," memoirs (408; lect. 36). In the case of Mason and Dixon, the Reverend again blurs the lines, constructing what is part memoir, part biography, part postmodern novel; insofar as he is not writing what Blair calls "full legitimate history," however, he "is not subject to the same laws of unvarying dignity and gravity. . . . he may descend into the most familiar anecdotes. What is chiefly required of him is, that he be sprightly and interesting; and especially,

that he inform us of things that are useful and curious; that he convey to us some sort of knowledge worth the acquiring” (Blair 408; lect. 36). In performing these functions, the Reverend, despite his frequent playfulness, takes seriously the question of historical truth. For Blair, the authority of history depends on its “record[ing] truth.” By doing so impartially and faithfully, history can be used for “the instruction of mankind”; in failing to do so, history loses its educational value. History serves the same didactic purpose for the Reverend, but in contrast, he uses his authority to work in the opposite direction, establishing a plurality of possible truths as he demonstrates that “our Sentiments,—how we dream’d of, and were mistaken in, each other,—count for at least as much as our poor cold Chronologies” (Pynchon M&D 696).

Narrative Authority

In his discussion of American literature between the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, Mark R. Patterson discusses a concept analogous to the Reverend’s “Representation of Authority” as narrator. Patterson refers to this concept as “narrative authority”; accurately gauging the Reverend’s narrative authority is of central importance in understanding the story he tells and determining where its various parts fall on the spectrum ranging from authoritative to unreliable. Patterson defines narrative authority as “the reader’s initial understanding and acceptance of the narrative’s particular conventions and ground rules” and the “particular social bond of illocutionary force, of narrative command and reader response” which develops between reader and text (197, xxiii); it is in this sense that I wish to approach the issue of authority in Pynchon’s major novels. Any attempt to persuade the reader to accept as valid the cultural anatomies

contained in these works depends on the effectiveness of the narrative authority. The reader's acceptance of narrative authority is particularly relevant in Pynchon's work as in postmodern literature generally because the "conventions and ground rules" are often the targets of this authority and thus are subject to change with no warning.

The primary element in the relationship between reader and text that remains constant in *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon* is the encyclopedism of both texts; in both, the narrative authority is built upon this encyclopedism. However, while the encyclopedism remains constant, two emblematic examples serve to demonstrate the different approaches to narrative authority Pynchon takes in each novel. Pynchon's confrontational form of narrative authority in *Gravity's Rainbow* is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the episode that culminates in "The Story of Byron the Bulb." As the unnamed colonel receives his haircut, he begins telling a story which the narrator quickly takes over and transforms into a dialogue between "Mister Information" and "Skippy." As even these names indicate, the exchange is another example of the novel's parodic enactment and subversion of its own authority. The narrator, rapidly shifting voices, begins in his usual third-person voice, focalized through the colonel, then switches to free direct discourse, before switching to the voice of "Skippy" and from there modulating to "Mister Information." The following passage begins with the narrator supplying the colonel's untagged, unquoted free direct discourse before "Skippy" interrupts for the first time:

Dammit, cutoff from my regiment here, gonna be captured and cremated
by dacoits! *Oh Jesus there they are now*, unthinkable Animals [. . .]

scarred dope-fiend faces, faired as the front end of a '37 Ford, same undirected eyes, same exemption from the Karmic Hammer—

A '37 Ford, exempt from the K.H.? C'mon quit fooling. They'll all end up in junkyards same as th' rest!

Oh, *will they*, Skippy? Why are there so many on the roads, then?

W-well gee, uh, Mister Information, th-th' War, I mean there's no new cars being built right now [. . .]

Skippy, you little fool, you are off on another of your senseless and retrograde journeys. (Pynchon GR 644)

Mr. Information continues in a patronizing tone, alluding derisively to both Rilke's *Duino Elegies* and the novel itself as he explains the "pointsman" who decides whether "we go to Happyville, instead of to Pain City. Or 'Der Leid-Stadt,' that's what the Germans call it. There is a mean poem about the Leid-Stadt, by a German man named Mr. Rilke. But we will not read it, because *we* are going to Happyville" (Pynchon GR 645). Mister Information, who seems to begin as a projection of the colonel's mind, is an avatar of the paranoid, know-it-all narrator at his most encyclopedic. In his condescending tone, he continues explaining to Skippy, the bewildered reader-surrogate,¹ the truth about the war, which is that "The real War is always there" and that "the right people are dying" (Pynchon GR 645). Here, Mister Information imitates the narrator's practice of imparting truths to the reader, such as the "Proverbs for Paranoids," but takes the side of the Elect as though this is what the reader has desired all along: to be comforted by the "real" truth behind the apparent reality, by the hope that "if we could eliminate them [the preterite] completely [. . .] Then no one would have to be killed in the War" (Pynchon

GR 645). Like a naive reader surprised by the possibility of a happy ending, Skippy eagerly responds, “Jeepers [. . .] Mister Information! Wow, I-I can’t wait to see Happyville!” (Pynchon GR 645). Pynchon’s brief detour travesties the implied desires of the reader for explanations and happy endings, reasserting the reader’s dependence on the narrator even as the narrator offers more information that mystifies rather than elucidates. The reader, as represented by “Skippy,” is left in the position of the paranoid: “If they can get you asking the wrong questions, they don’t have to worry about answers” (Pynchon GR 251).

In *Mason & Dixon*, reader-surrogates are ready-made in the form of the family members who listen to the Reverend’s tale. His interaction with them sharply contrasts the narrator’s interaction with the implied reader in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, in large part because of their actualized humanity. Rather than an impersonal “you” or a “Skippy” that the narrator characterizes however he likes, the Reverend addresses people about whom he cares. While more respectful of his listeners than the narrator of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the Reverend is far from obsequious; his carefully orchestrated control of the narrative and manipulation of his listeners is more understated than that of the narrator of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, plying them into submission, rather than hitting them over the head. His description of the coach that takes him to meet Mason and Dixon in Octarara, Pennsylvania, provides a typical example of his milder approach to persuading his listeners to accept his authority:

Our Coach is a late invention of the Jesuits, being, to speak bluntly, a Conveyance, wherein the inside is quite noticeably larger than the outside, though the fact cannot be appreciated until one is inside. For your Benefit,

DePugh, the Mathematickall and Philosophickal Principles upon which the Design depends are known to most Students of the appropriate Arts,—so that I hesitate to burden the Company with information easily obtain'd elsewhere. That my Authorial Authority be made more secure, however, it may be reveal'd without danger that at the basis of the Design lies a logarithmic idea of the three dimensions of Space, realiz'd in an intricate Connexion of precise Analytickal curves, some bearing loads, others merely decorative, still others serving as Cam-Surfaces guiding the motions of other Parts.—

(‘We believe you, Wicks. We do. Pray go on’). (Pynchon M&D 354)

The Reverend’s level of sincerity in this passage is ambiguous: his comments are as much verbal smokescreen as they are explanation. Likewise, his listeners may be sincere in their response or may simply wish to move to the more interesting parts of the story. However, despite the ambiguity, the Reverend is clearly concerned that the audience believe his story, even down to the most unlikely and inconsequential details. He insists on the truthfulness of what he says so that his “Authorial Authority be made more secure,” and his insistence, whether sincere or not, results in his listeners’ acquiescence. Rather than leave his listeners to decide how to fit this seemingly fantastic coach into the narrative, the Reverend simplifies matters by insisting on its reality.

The narrator of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, on the other hand, leaves open the question of how to naturalize the surrealistic elements of his narrative or whether to naturalize them at all.² The dialogue between Mister Information and Skippy grows out of the colonel’s

conversation with Eddie Pensiero, but as it shifts from quoted dialogue to third-person narration, the exact ontological status becomes unclear. Brian McHale captures this ontological uncertainty in his question, “Which reel?” (PF 128-30). McHale refers specifically to Pynchon’s use of “movie metaphors [that] are developed so concretely and at such length that we begin to lose sight of the literal reality of which they are supposedly the vehicle,” but the idea also applies to the present example because, as in the many film-based metaphors, “The distinction between literal reality and metaphorical vehicle becomes increasingly indeterminate” (PF 128, 129). The further the dialogue between Mister Information and Skippy progresses from the colonel’s tagged direct discourse that inspired it, the more difficult it becomes to decide whether the dialogue is part of the colonel’s thoughts, with Skippy and Mister Information as projections of these thoughts, or whether the colonel’s thoughts have occasioned yet another digression from the narrator. The narrator leaves the uncertainty unresolved as he returns to his usual third-person voice, focalized through the colonel, who is taken on a tour of Happyville that culminates in a mysterious encounter with Laszlo Jamf, a character prominent in several of the other subplots in the novel but with whom the colonel is presumably completely unfamiliar.³ The convergence of previously unrelated plot tangents promises significance but trails off anticlimactically in an ellipsis: “the men have come from very far away, after a journey neither quite remembers, on a mission of some kind. But each has been kept ignorant of the other’s role. . . .” (Pynchon GR 647). Challenging the reader to keep up, the narrator completely changes directions in the following paragraph and introduces the story of Byron, the light bulb suspended over the colonel’s head, another story that ends just before reaching its climax as Eddie Pensiero, under “the pain-

radiance of [Byron] the Bulb,” aims his scissors at the colonel’s exposed jugular (Pynchon GR 655).

At its extreme, the narrative authority of *Gravity’s Rainbow* relies largely on establishing the reader’s dependence on the narrator and the narrator’s autonomy with respect to the reader. The reader’s dependence and the narrator’s authority are reciprocal; as Patterson states, “Only absolute authority can create its own laws, invoke absolute autonomy” (xxvii). Though the narrator disclaims absolute authority, in foregrounding his control of the reader, he assumes what amounts to *de facto* absolute authority. In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, what Patterson calls the “social bond of illocutionary force, of narrative command and reader response” is entirely one-sided. The reader is left bound to the narrator but unsure whether what is being represented is “literal reality” or “metaphorical vehicle,” as Brian McHale puts it, because it is impossible to determine whether the narrator’s utterances are sincere (i.e., whether or not they are made under felicitous conditions) and thus possess any illocutionary force.

In contrast, the Reverend’s narrative authority in *Mason & Dixon* is consistent with the kind Patterson associates with the post-Revolutionary period during which the novel is set: “Mediating between these two terms of authority and autonomy, then, is representation—the metaphoric space creating a conditional authority *and* conditional autonomy for both commander and subordinate” (xxvii). The “Topick of Representation” in its many forms, political, religious, and artistic among them, is an unavoidable theme in *Mason & Dixon* (Pynchon M&D 404); as Mason’s brother-in-law explains, “ev’ryone needs Representation, from time to time. If you go to America, you’ll be hearing all about that, I expect” (Pynchon M&D 202). The Reverend occupies

the metaphoric space of representation that Patterson describes, and he negotiates, usually in his own favor, between his authority and the autonomy of both his listeners and the people of whom he tells as he narrates many events for which he “was there in but a representational sense, ghostly as an imperfect narrative to be told in futurity” (Pynchon M&D 195). Unlike the narrator of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, however, the Reverend insists on the illocutionary force of his utterances so as to avoid confusion over “which reel” is playing. His representation of events follows the model of “*Consubstantiation*,—or the Bread and Wine remaining Bread and Wine, whilst the spiritual Presence is reveal’d in Parallel Fashion, so to speak,—[. . .]” (Pynchon M&D 404). Thus, whatever the Jesuit Coach, that “metaphorical vehicle” “wherein the inside is quite noticeably larger than the outside,” may represent, it also remains “literal reality.” It is to convince his listeners and readers of this possibility that the Reverend uses his narrative authority.

Narrative Authority and Encyclopedism in *Gravity’s Rainbow*

Viewing encyclopedism in the larger context of related genres and concepts allows one to see it as not just a characteristic of style and subject matter but as a major ingredient in the relationship between a text and its readers. Encyclopedism creates authority; in other words, through the incorporation of encyclopedic detail, a text (through its narrator) gains credibility with the reader as an epistemic authority whose expertise extends to all areas of knowledge. The same process can be observed on a smaller scale in nearly any text, even those at the other end of the spectrum in terms of style: a novel written in a minimalist style such as Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, for instance, establishes its authority on bullfighting through the narration of Jake Barnes. The much greater scope

of the narrator's expertise in an encyclopedic novel, however, implies through synecdoche that the text's authority extends to all areas of knowledge.

Even as encyclopedism creates authority, however, the self-consciousness of the form results in the questioning of its own authority. As seen in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon's use of parody and self-parody subverts any notion of absolute authority, including the narrator's. However, encyclopedism used in the service of parody, even as the target of parody, reinforces the values and authority of encyclopedism. The novel's authority is still left intact in a limited, "conditional and contingent" form (Patterson xxi). As Hutcheon argues, parody is always authorized transgression (ATOP 69-83); in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the narrator's transgressions are authorized by his encyclopedism. These transgressions demonstrate the narrator's autonomy and come in various forms, including violations of decorum, alternative versions of official histories, and violations of the "conventions and ground rules" the narrator has previously established. The victim or target of these transgressions is, of course, the reader: the narrator's encyclopedic authority is exercised upon the reader. At the extreme, as an encyclopedic fiction becomes more prescriptive in its cultural anatomy, the narrator will begin to portray his epistemic authority as deontic authority, like that of a sacred text.

Tom LeClair unabashedly refers to this relationship between text and reader as "mastery" in his analysis of recent novels influenced by systems theory. LeClair rejects the category of encyclopedic novel with reference to *Gravity's Rainbow* because of what he sees as the novel's overdetermined theme of alienation (39); since it is dominated by a single theme, LeClair argues, the novel fails to achieve a truly encyclopedic breadth. Rather than an encyclopedic novel, LeClair classifies *Gravity's Rainbow* as the

paradigmatic example of what he calls the novel of excess (28); in most respects, however, this category is similar to the broadly defined notion of encyclopedism in fiction discussed in the previous chapter. Novels of excess feature “three essential criteria of mastery: mastery of the world in which they were written, mastery of narrative methods, and mastery of the reader” (LeClair 5). The first two of these qualities are analogous to the accretion of information and incorporation of diverse genres and modes found in encyclopedic and Menippean fiction; the third, “mastery of the reader,” is evident in Pynchon’s deployment of encyclopedic information through his narrator and is the purpose of the authority created through encyclopedism.

LeClair rather generously reads *Gravity’s Rainbow*’s mastery of its reader as an effort “to both solicit and transform the reader’s interests, to shift his or her attention from the personal and local to the communal and global” (3). To achieve this goal, Pynchon and other novelists of excess include in their works “traditionally affecting materials” (LeClair 3); “Ultimately,” LeClair believes, “the reader of *Gravity’s Rainbow* is mastered as is a student” (56). In this reading, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, like a sacred text, uses its authority over the reader to convince him or her to accept a specific set of beliefs. Since the set of beliefs that LeClair discovers in *Gravity’s Rainbow* is one with which he happens to agree, he de-emphasizes the narrator’s manipulation of and antagonism toward the reader.

The rhizomatic structure of the semiotic encyclopedia that serves as a model for the accretion of encyclopedic information in *Gravity’s Rainbow* disallows the kind of hierarchy LeClair imposes on the text in declaring alienation the master narrative that brings order and meaning to the rest of the novel and allows LeClair to identify the global

norms and beliefs supported by the implied author. Recalling Eco's description of the semiotic encyclopedia, any such reading is necessarily an ideological projection of local systems of knowledge onto the global whole (SPL 84). Doing so "is to be delivered into a system whose only aim is to *violate* the Cycle," as Pynchon describes the corruption of the ouroboros by the capitalist system (GR 412). *Gravity's Rainbow* discourages any such totalizing reading and makes it nearly impossible to identify the implied author's norms and beliefs through the shifting sands of the narrator's self-parody and irony. It is the narrator, more than the implied author or the text itself, that masters the reader by constantly changing the terms of their relationship.

While encyclopedism provides the foundation for authority in Pynchon's novels, that authority is wielded in various ways by specific narrators. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, the unnamed narrator functions as the unchallenged voice of authority: all of the information the reader receives is filtered through this undramatized, self-conscious third-person narrator (in Wayne Booth's terms). Pseudo-academic alternative authorities are the targets of parody, such as the film critic Mitchell Prettyplace, author of the "definitive 18-volume study of *King Kong*," and Mickey Wuxtry-Wuxtry, the "world-renowned analyst" (Pynchon GR 275, 738). Late in the novel, when the narrator mentions Wuxtry-Wuxtry's suggestion that Laszlo Jamf was a product of Slothrop's imagination, the information is easily incorporated as inauthentic and does not force the reader to reevaluate the entire history of Slothrop's conditioning. However, the reader's dependence on the narrator's authority is highlighted when the narrator contradicts himself and the reader is forced to go through the process that Brian McHale refers to as "retroactive deconcretization": when the narrator reveals, sometimes hundreds of pages

later, that a previous scene presented as part of the fictive reality of the world of the novel was perhaps imaginary or hallucinatory (CP 67-71). The reader is left with “elements whose ontological status is unstable, flickering, and indeterminable” (McHale CP 70). In the case of Mrs. Quoad and the Disgusting English Candy Drill, for instance, both Slothrop’s experience and the conflicting account of Mrs. Quoad by Pointsman’s investigators are presented authoritatively by the narrator in encyclopedic detail with no indication which should be accepted as the fictional reality. Even as the narrator demonstrates his unreliability through such inconsistencies, McHale’s reading further reifies the narrator’s authority by suggesting both scenes contain elements of authenticity despite the apparent contradiction. Confronting the same scene, Alec McHoul and David Wills decide “it would be as well to look outside the question of narratorial authority” in reading *Gravity’s Rainbow* and suggest that distinguishing between real and non-real events in the novel is a fool’s errand (48). However, McHoul and Wills’s suggestion merely allows them to dodge the question. A rigorous investigation of how the authority established by encyclopedism is deployed through Pynchon’s narrators reveals a great deal about not only his methods but his meanings as well.

Nearly all of the critics who comment on the narrator of *Gravity’s Rainbow* attempt to deal with his Protean nature. While Slothrop is explicitly compared to the comic book character Plasticman, the narrator is the true shape shifter in the novel. Describing the difficulty of characterizing the narrator, Linda A. Westervelt explains that in addition to “varying his style and the perspective from which he tells his story, the narrator also varies the distance at which he places the reader from the story” (79). Westervelt identifies several types of direct address the narrator uses to vary the reader’s

distance, from the “preterite we” the narrator uses when disclaiming omniscience and putting himself in a position analogous to that of the reader to “the ‘you’ characterized by the satirist as one who is opposed to authoritarian systems, the ‘you’ whom the narrator encourages to empathize with the characters, and the ‘you’ whose critical opinion the narrator solicits and dismisses” (82). The narrator goes even further than Westervelt suggests, not just dismissing the reader’s opinions and expectations but occasionally insulting the reader in the process. For instance, after activating the same sense of paranoia he has cultivated throughout the novel by encouraging the reader to suspect that some sinister significance connects each of the obscure towns in a list he has provided, the narrator announces, “Well you’re *wrong*, champ—these happen to be towns all located on the borders of *Time Zones*, is all. Ha, ha! Caught *you* with your hand in your pants! Go on show us *all* what you were doing or leave the area, we don’t need your kind around. There’s nothing so loathsome as a sentimental surrealist” (GR 695-96). The variation of distance and privilege with which the narrator “push[es] the reader away immediately after appearing to offer intimacy” (Westervelt 84) works in conjunction with the narrator’s self-parody to subvert his own encyclopedic authority while at the same time demonstrating the narrator’s power over the reader. By preventing the reader from becoming secure in his position relative to the narrator, Pynchon foregrounds the narrator’s control and mastery of the reader.

Narrative Authority in *Mason & Dixon*

The primary difference between Pynchon’s use of encyclopedism in *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon* lies in the contrasting sources of information in the two

novels. Though *Mason & Dixon* begins with an undramatized third-person narrator, this figure plays a relatively minor role and by the end of the first chapter gives way to the Reverend Wicks Cherrycoke, who narrates the story of Mason and Dixon with only occasional returns to the primary frame and parenthetical interpolations in the Reverend's narration by the outer frame narrator. The vast majority of information the reader receives is thus filtered through a figure quite different than the narrator of *Gravity's Rainbow*. In Booth's terms, Cherrycoke is a dramatized, self-conscious, first-person narrator-agent, the first such narrator Pynchon has used since Fausto Maijstral in *V.*, his first novel.⁴

Contemporary narratology, particularly the work of Gérard Genette, offers a more extensive and versatile vocabulary for classifying the Reverend as narrator. First of all, the Reverend is a character in the novel's framing narrative or primary diegetic level, which is set in the LeSparks' den in late 1786. The Reverend serves as the narrator of the embedded or hypodiegetic⁵ narrative that recounts the careers of Mason and Dixon. He can be further classified as an intradiegetic narrator since he is "a character in a framing narrative that [he] does not tell" (Prince 46). Additionally, at the hypodiegetic level he functions as a homodiegetic narrator, "a narrator who is a character in the situations s/he recounts" (Prince 41). Lastly, the Reverend regularly falls into pseudodiegetic narrative in recounting stories that he has heard from Mason, Dixon, and others. Pseudodiegetic narrative "consists of telling as if it were diegetic (as if it were at the same narrative level as its context) something that has nevertheless been presented as (or can easily be guessed to be) metadiegetic [or hypodiegetic] in its principle or, if one prefers, in its origin" (Genette ND 236). By leaving the sources of the stories he tells unspecified, the

Reverend effaces the final stage of transmission from the narrative that his listeners and the readers receive.

In the transformation from speaking character to narrator that occurs as the quotation marks drop off the Reverend's speech, the Reverend assumes a higher level of authority in relation to the reader, similar to the narrator of *Gravity's Rainbow* or to the narrator of the primary level in *Mason & Dixon*, but subject to constant evaluations of reliability from which these undramatized, extradiegetic narrators remains exempt: when the narrator of *Gravity's Rainbow* explains that the stars on Slothrop's map match the locations of V-2 explosions, we accept this as part of the fictive reality of the novel; when the Reverend describes Mason and Dixon's encounter with a talking dog upon their first meeting, we wonder what the "real" explanation could be. Reliability only becomes an issue in *Gravity's Rainbow* when the narrator is inconsistent in his presentation of the fictive reality; this inconsistency, as well as his inconsistency in privilege and distance, is what limits his authority. In *Mason & Dixon*, the question of reliability constantly threatens to subvert the Reverend's limited authority, regardless of his consistency. Whereas encyclopedism establishes the authority of the extradiegetic narrator of *Gravity's Rainbow*, at times it brings the Reverend's authority into question when he seems to have information that it would not be possible for him to know. As a result, the Reverend as narrator assumes a different position in relation to the reader and employs contrasting methods of interacting with the reader.

One of the clearest contrasts is that unlike the extensive use of direct address in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the Reverend does not directly address the reader at all, dealing instead with the family members who listen to his tale and act as surrogates for the

reader. By repeatedly inviting intimacy and then dismissing the reader, as Westervelt demonstrates, the narrator of *Gravity's Rainbow* demonstrates his power over the reader, who is represented in the text only by an undramatized narratee. As the Reverend narrates his story, the listeners function as dramatized narratees capable of responding to attempts to manipulate them. Consequently, the Reverend maintains a much closer and more consistent distance between himself and both his listeners and the reader. The Reverend's attempts at manipulating his listeners and readers necessarily take a much less antagonistic form than those of the *Gravity's Rainbow* narrator. The difference rests on the contrasting narratees in the two novels: as mentioned earlier, the Reverend's audience consists of actual (fictional) people he knows and cares about and who know him and how he tells stories. As the dramatized narratees of the hypodiegetic narrative, they play an important role as characters in the primary narrative, offering a variety of responses to the Reverend's story. The narratee of *Gravity's Rainbow*, the "you" to whom the narrator addresses his story, on the other hand, is an anonymous extradiegetic figure that the narrator characterizes and harangues as he pleases. The analogous extradiegetic narratee of the primary narrative of *Mason & Dixon* remains covert throughout the novel.

Mason & Dixon offers several possible models for the Reverend's position in relation to his narratees as well as to the events he narrates; the first of these underscores clearly the contrast between his position and that of the *Gravity's Rainbow* narrator. The unnamed narrator of the outer frame diegesis puts the Reverend squarely in the position of Scheherazade when he explains that Cherrycoke is staying at the home "of Mr. J. Wade LeSpark, a respected Merchant, active in Town Affairs whilst in his home yet

Sultan enough to convey to the Rev^d, tho' without ever so stipulating, that, for as long as he can keep the children amus'd, he may remain,—too much evidence of Juvenile Rampage at the wrong moment, however, and Boppo! 'twill be Out the Door with him, where waits the Winter's Block and Blade" (Pynchon M&D 7). Given this situation, the Reverend will not be suggesting that the narratees are "Glozing Neuters" nor accusing them of having their "hand[s] in [their] pants" (Pynchon GR 677). In fact, though the Reverend commands a similar amount of encyclopedic information, due to his position in relation to the narratees, his presentation of this information is starkly different than in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Rather than leaving the ontological status of any doubtful events open for the reader to determine, he is quite specific in offering his narrative as a true history of the fictional world of the novel.

Though both narrators base their authority on the encyclopedic scope of their narratives, they display different attitudes toward this authority. Both are wary of absolute authority, but while the narrator of *Gravity's Rainbow* is extremely conflicted about his own position of nearly absolute authority, to the point that he attacks his own authority and the reader that expects and depends on it, the Reverend is able to assume the role of narrator quite comfortably. The Reverend's models in doing so include, in addition to Scheherazade, Samuel Johnson and James Boswell, the former serving as a model for the Reverend's delivery of his tale, the latter for his recording of the tale; both serve as models for the Reverend's authority.

The Reverend knows Johnson well enough to quote him directly early in his narrative when describing the worthiness of the *Seahorse*, which "has done her duty in the service of a miracle in that year of miracles, 1759, upon whose Ides of March Dr.

Johnson happen'd to remark, 'No man will be a sailor who has contrivance enough to get himself into a jail; for being in a ship is being in a jail, with the chance of being drowned'" (Pynchon M&D 35). This particular example demonstrates in miniature many of the questions raised by the issues of the Reverend's authority and Pynchon's encyclopedic style. The Reverend refers to Johnson as an authority and in doing so demonstrates his own authoritative knowledge; the inclusion of this allusion contributes to the text's overall encyclopedism. However, the reference also raises the question of the source for the Reverend's quotation: on what authority does he quote Johnson? The explicit reference to the date of the remark indicates that the source is Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, in which Boswell relates the comment immediately prior to presenting a letter from Tobias Smollett dated 16 March 1759, though it should be noted that the section preceding the letter is only assigned the date of 1759, not specifically March 15 (246-247). Boswell's *Life* was not published until 1791, however, making the Reverend's reference to it anachronistic given the novel's 1786 setting. In the *Life*, Boswell cites his own *Tour to the Hebrides* (1785) as his source in quoting Johnson; though this earlier source could have been available to the Reverend at the time of his narration, Boswell reports Johnson making the remark in the entry for 31 August 1773 and his punctuation varies slightly from that found in the *Life* and reproduced in the Reverend's quotation. The only connection between Johnson's comment and the Ides of March 1759 is Boswell's placement of the comment in the *Life* just before Smollett's letter of 16 March. Whether this confusion results from sloppiness on Pynchon's part or whether it is intentionally incorporated into the Reverend's establishment of authority is unclear; in either case, this example demonstrates the difficulty both in gauging the Reverend's

authority and in determining how information from the actual world encyclopedia is incorporated into the fictional world encyclopedia: without a reliable assessment of the Reverend's authority, reconstruction of the fictional encyclopedia, knowledge of which "is absolutely necessary for the reader to comprehend a fictional world" (Doležel FWDGI 208), is impossible.

The Reverend's reference to one of Johnson's witty maxims explicitly connects the issues of encyclopedism and authority. The web of connections constructed by an encyclopedic narrative is evident in the linkage of significant events culminating in a chance remark of Johnson's that comments directly on the characters' situation in the *Seahorse*. Johnson's name, as Fredric V. Bogel points out, is nearly synonymous with authority, though Johnson himself is ambiguous on the nature and meaning of authority:

In his dictionary, he defines "authoritative" in two ways: "having due authority" and "having an air of authority." The first of these stresses the possession of authority; the second, the appearance of possessing it. Johnson's definition of the adverbial form, "authoritatively," is similarly divided, though there the order is reversed: "in an authoritative manner, with a shew of authority," and "with due authority." In each case, the idea of the authoritative displays both an attributive and a rhetorical dimension. (7)

The "attributive" and "rhetorical" dimensions of Johnson's different definitions can alternatively be seen in terms of an opposition between constative and performative functions (Wechselblatt 25). The Reverend, Mason and Dixon's "Boswell," possesses "due authority," having known the two central figures and having witnessed many of the

events he describes; certainly this is the view the Reverend promotes. In the Reverend's account of a hypothetical meeting between Mason, Johnson and Boswell, Mason explains, "We had a joint Boswell. Preacher nam'd Cherrycoke. Scribbling ev'rything down, just like you, Sir" (Pynchon M&D 747). On the other hand, as a Schuylkill-side Scheherazade who must earn his keep with the stories he tells, the Reverend must project "an air of authority" if his "Representation of Authority" is to make his story-telling successful; he "understands that his authority can only be *represented*, in other words, can only be granted by his readers on certain reciprocal conditions" (Patterson xxi). It is not enough in his situation to simply be an authority, the position Ives LeSpark assumes; he must enact his authority so as to entertain if he hopes to see his listeners accept it.

The tension between the constative and performative strains of authority can be felt throughout *Mason & Dixon* and is also implicit in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Discussing Johnson's work, Bogel points out that though the two are not necessarily in conflict, the "possibility of conflict is written . . . into [Johnson's] ways of assuming authority" (7); the problem becomes a question of "how to assume authority without simply doing so, how to both claim and disclaim authority so as to exert its power without being crushed by its guiltiness" (Bogel 23). The same possibility of conflict is implicit in the narrative maneuverings of Pynchon's encyclopedic fiction, as already observed in the tendency toward self-parody in *Gravity's Rainbow*. There, the conflict takes on the shape of a vicious circle as the narrator oscillates back and forth between assuming the godlike-position of traditional extradiegetic third-person narrators in a position of mastery over the reader and what Westervelt calls the "preterite we," with which the narrator puts himself in the same position as the reader and denies his own authority. The narrator's

identification with the preterite and the reader produces guilt over his assumption of authority similar to what Bogel observes in Johnson. In a novel that is largely a critique of authority, from Weberian charismatic figures to academics to the very notion of cause and effect, the narrator cannot “simply” assume a position of authority.

The incorporation of encyclopedic detail is an attempt to provide a foundation for the narrator’s authority; however, the attempt is self-defeating since it must always remain synecdochic: how much information is enough? In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Pointsman, confronted by his investigators’ reports that the stars on Slothrop’s map apparently have no real world referents, prepares his response: “The data, so far, are incomplete” (Pynchon GR 272). Likewise, even the novel itself must remain only a part of the encyclopedic whole; Hite recognizes the inevitably synecdochic status of the novel when she argues that the frequent use of ellipses in the novel is “a further indication of Pynchon’s commitment to incompleteness” (138). Confronted by the impossibility of representing everything or what Clark calls the “tension between totalization and incompleteness” that characterizes the fictional encyclopedia (FE 36), the narrator takes out his frustrations on the narratee, only to offer yet more information: “You will want cause and effect. All right. Thanatz was washed overboard in the same storm that took Slothrop from the *Anubis*. He was rescued by a Polish undertaker in a rowboat, out in the storm tonight to see if he can get struck by lightning” (Pynchon GR 663). The narrator projects onto the reader his own frustrations with the problematic assumption of authority and parodies this authority in order to reassert it as an authority aware of its own limitations and lack of grounding. In this way, the constative authority conventionally assigned to the extradiegetic third-person narrator devolves into the performative

authority of encyclopedism which in turn arbitrarily asserts itself as constative even as both forms are revealed to be ultimately insufficient and provisional.

The narrator's problematic assumption of authority, his attempt, as Bogel puts it, "to both claim and disclaim" authority simultaneously, is linked to his use of parody and, even moreso, self-parody. As Linda Hutcheon explains, "the textual and pragmatic natures of parody imply, at one and the same time, authority and transgression" (ATOP 69). Following Bakhtin, Hutcheon views parody as a "relativizing, deprivileging mode" (ATOP 69). While this is certainly the case in *Gravity's Rainbow*, it is also the case that what emerges from the deprivileging of authority is the narrator. In criticizing official forms of authority, referred to variously as They, the System, and the Bad Guys, the narrator deconditions the narratee's unquestioning acceptance of these authorities while securing his own authority over the reader. The narrator's exposure of his own authoritative role in relation to the reader through self-parody acts metaphorically as a pre-emptive inoculation against any subversion of his own authority.

Bogel finds a similar approach to authority in Johnson, in whom one typically finds "the co-presence of genuine authority and the histrionic affectation of authority, of Johnson and 'Dr. Johnson' . . . above all, of the demystification of authority and the continuing potency of that authority" (33). In contrast to the guilt or perhaps paranoia pervading the assertion of authority by the narrator of *Gravity's Rainbow*, the Reverend displays few reservations in assuming a level of authority typically unavailable to first-person human narrators. The Reverend borrows "one of Johnson's principal strategies for simultaneously claiming and disclaiming authority . . . [by] adopt[ing] the *role* of authority, of sage, and . . . do[ing] so in ways that call attention to its status as a role"

(Bogel 33). The self-consciousness typical of encyclopedic fiction emerges in the Reverend's foregrounding of his role as authority, as "Boswell," and as author of the history he reads to his relatives. Although in foregrounding these roles he also highlights the uncertain foundation of his authority, his disclaiming of authority is mere formulaic ritual and assures "the continuing potency of that authority":

"After years wasted," the Rev^d commences, "at perfecting a *parsonickal Disguise*,—grown old in the service of an Impersonation that never took more than a Handful of actor's tricks,—past remembering those Yearnings for Danger, past all that ought to have been, but never had a Hope of becoming, have I beach'd upon these Republican Shores,—stoven, dismasted, imbécile with age,—an untrustworthy Remembrancer for whom the few events yet rattling within a broken memory must provide the only comfort now remaining to him—" (Pynchon M&D 8)

Coming to the first meeting of Mason and Dixon, the Reverend explains the basis for his authority: "I was not there when they met,—or, not in the usual Way. I later heard from them how they remember'd meeting. I tried to record, in what I then projected as a sort of *Spiritual Day-Book*, what I could remember of what they said,—tho' 'twas too often abridg'd by the Day's Fatigue" (Pynchon M&D 14). The Reverend then proceeds with an air of authority comfortable in itself and unconcerned with possible challenges.

Where the narrator of *Gravity's Rainbow* occasionally and surprisingly claims ignorance, the Reverend claims near omniscience. While the narrator of *Gravity's Rainbow* appears guilty or paranoid over authority that is conventionally his for the taking and that the

reader expects and often wants him to exercise, the Reverend embraces his role as though there could be no doubt of his complete authority.

Conclusion

For Johnson the threat in the question of authority lies in “the danger . . . of self-authorization, of an authority founded on nothing external to the self and its constructions” (Bogel 8). In his encyclopedic fiction, Pynchon responds to a similar fear through the incorporation of factual information and descriptive details that are part of the actual world encyclopedia in order to provide an independent external foundation for the text’s narrative authority. Hite alludes to the compulsive quality of Pynchon’s inclusiveness in her analysis of *Gravity’s Rainbow*: “A great deal of this information is of dubious relevance however. When the narrator turns to the unsuccessful British attempts to build a rocket, he seems motivated only by the desire not to leave anything out, as if the history of V-2 development necessarily included everything having to do with rocketry” (137). Paradoxically, the fear of solipsistic self-authorization is more evident in the impersonal, extradiegetic narrator of *Gravity’s Rainbow* than in Reverend Cherrycoke.

A desire analogous to the inclusiveness of Pynchon’s style is the source of comedy in *Mason & Dixon*, however, when Chef Allègre describes Vaucanson’s Duck. After explaining the verisimilitude of the Duck’s “Digestionary Process,” Allègre is met with a response similar to Hite’s comment on *Gravity’s Rainbow*: “A mechanical Duck that shits? To whom can it matter [. . .]—who besides a farmer would even recognize Duck Waste, however compulsively accurate? [. . .]” asks Mr. Whitpot (Pynchon M&D

372). Allègre's response might just as well describe an encyclopedic author's Joycean hope that his work take on a life of its own as the mechanical Duck:

“Some,” the Frenchman bristles, “might point rather to a Commitment of Ingenuity unprecedented, toward making All authentic,—perhaps, it could be argued by minds more scientifick, ’twas this very Attention to Detail, whose Fineness, passing some Critickal Value, enabl’d in the Duck that strange Metamorphosis, which has sent it out the Gates of the Inanimate, and off upon its present Journey into the given World.” (Pynchon M&D 372)

The compulsive desire “toward making All authentic” drives Pynchon’s inclusive style; as a result he includes vast amounts of information, particularly esoteric information, from the actual world encyclopedia in order to give greater authenticity to his fictional creations, displaying an “Attention to Detail, whose Fineness” has been commented on by nearly all of his critics. The importance of waste in Pynchon’s fiction was evident as early as his short story “Low-lands,” with its junkyard setting. That the above exchange specifically involves “A mechanical Duck that shits” is funny, but clearly this type of fanatic accuracy is important to the author who earlier brought to the world Slothrop’s trip down the toilet, Brigadier Pudding’s coprophilia, and that “issue of another kind of fanaticism: that of the specialist,” the Toiletship (Pynchon GR 448). By spreading his attention even as far as not only metaphorical but also literal shit, Pynchon demonstrates his own mastery of knowledge, thus furthering the authority of his novel and its narrator.

Variations on this technique are common in postmodern literature; in fact, many postmodern novels generate their own authority by displaying their mastery of and then

calling into question the authority of the various versions of accepted historical fact that they incorporate.⁶ Alternative, apocryphal, and secret histories provide much of the interest in works such as Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, Don DeLillo's *Libra*, Robert Coover's *The Public Burning*, as well as all of Pynchon's novels. The skill with which these authors weave history and fiction together contributes to the overall authority of their novels. Susan Sniader Lanser offers a useful description: "We might call this authority that the text itself generates through skillful construction a *mimetic authority*, as opposed to the *diegetic authority* that comes directly from the person of the author or from a narrating voice" (90). Lanser's two categories are roughly equivalent to the epistemic authority LeClair labels mastery and what Patterson calls narrative authority. Applying "mimetic authority" in this sense to postmodern works of historical fiction is not so much a matter of historical accuracy, though that is a major concern: these works go out of their way to display their mastery of historical fact, even in their explicit contradictions of those facts. Lanser's mimetic authority is more a matter of expertise and mastery embodied in the text as a whole, the kind of authority Joyce aimed for in seeking "to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city one day disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book." In *Gravity's Rainbow* the mimetic or epistemic authority of the text is complemented but also complicated by the confrontational, self-conscious diegetic authority of the narrator, in *Mason & Dixon* by the performative diegetic authority of the Reverend.

Both narrators compensate for the danger of self-authorization that troubled Johnson through encyclopedism, constructing worlds so large and detailed as to imply their self-sufficiency outside of the narrating self, so complex that they seem, like the

Duck, to take on lives of their own. However, the Reverend goes even further to avoid the danger of self-authorization by framing his story as not simply his own construction but as a construction of the historical past of the novel's fictive reality. Like the Poor Richard persona of Benjamin Franklin, which provides another of the models for narrative authority presented in the novel, the Reverend avoids the details of "defining the exact conditions of his authority. . . . Instead, he wants to determine how to *judge* authority and merit, and by obscuring other questions he presents his own authority as a *fait accompli*. As he moves people to buy his books, they judge his merit and also warrant his authority" (Patterson xix). In the Reverend's case, it is not his books his listeners are buying but his version of history.

Although Pynchon's work is solidly in the style of postmodern literature, in *Mason & Dixon* he has other important touchstones for his treatment of history and for his development of narrative authority. By way of introducing Johnson's explanation of how "the *Plan* of [his] *Dictionary* came to be inscribed to Lord Chesterfield," Boswell explains in his *Life of Johnson*, "There is, perhaps in every thing of any consequence, a secret history which it would be amusing to know, could we have it authentically communicated" (Boswell 132). William Byrd's *History of the Dividing Line* provides a case in point. In *Mason & Dixon*, a young Thomas Jefferson informs Dixon that Byrd records "not only the Miles and Poles travers'd, but more usefully all the Human Stuff" (Pynchon M&D 396). The Reverend's *Spiritual Day-Book* supplements Mason's *Journal* in much the same way that Byrd's *Secret History* supplements his *History*. As the Reverend creates his narrative authority, the challenge left to the reader is to determine whether this supplementary material has been "authentically communicated."

Evaluating the factors that contribute to this determination will be the subject of the next chapter.

Endnotes

1. In contrast to my reading of this scene, Thomas Moore argues that “the sinister speech by ‘Mister Information’ to ‘Skippy’ alludes first to the Percy Crosby cartoon strip *Skippy*, of 1920s-1945 vintage” (170). According to Moore, Crosby’s own mental illness grew into paranoid delusions and he was finally committed; Moore sees in this biographical information a possible source for “Mister Information” (170).
2. On the possibilities of naturalizing various fantastic scenes in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, see McHale (CP 71-73). After arguing that it is possible to explain away most of the novel’s stranger events as the fantasies, hallucinations, or dreams of one character or another, McHale concludes that while “this may be a satisfying outcome . . . our satisfaction will have been purchased at the price of too much of the text’s interest. . . . This naturalization . . . is too powerful: it drastically curtails the process of reconstructing a world, ultimately leaving too little unresolved” (CP 73). Film is also used commonly to naturalize both events and the style of their presentation. See especially Clerc (FGR 103-151), Cowart (AA 31-62), Moore (30-62), Simmon (124-139).
3. Jamf’s presence can be explained, though perhaps not “naturalized,” by the “shiver-borne blues” being played on harmonica in the background, presumably by Slothrop. Then again, this does not really explain anything at all: even if the harmonica player is Slothrop, it remains unclear how his music leads to Jamf’s presence in the colonel’s fantasy, and as McHale states with regard to the story of Byron the Bulb which follows, “Other naturalizations are possible, however” (CP 279). Of these other possibilities, McHale describes as “more disorienting” the possibility I find most appealing: that Byron is part of the fictive reality of the novel (CP 279).

4. For his discussion of point of view, see Booth (149-165). Pynchon employs another dramatized, self-conscious, first-person narrator-agent in the “Confessions of Fausto Maijstral” chapter of *V.*, which, like the Reverend’s narration, is also an embedded narrative. Though Fausto writes his “Confessions” in first-person, he distances himself by referring to his past selves as Fausto I, Fausto II, and so on. Herbert Stencil in *V.* and Callisto in “Entropy” also refer to themselves in the third-person, a practice Pynchon connects to Henry Adams through explicit references in both works; the artificiality and distance it creates, as well as the absence of conventional first-person narration from Pynchon’s next three novels, may indicate a distaste for the first-person on Pynchon’s part. In any event, the scarcity of first-person narration in his earlier work makes the primacy of the Reverend’s role surprising. It is less surprising, however, when the Reverend begins to efface himself from his story and to refer to his younger self in the third person.

5. Gérard Genette originally adopted the prefix “meta-” to denote an embedded narrative, but Mieke Bal persuasively argues that “hypo-” is less confusing since “metadiegesis” could be construed as a “discourse *on* the discourse” rather than a “discourse *in* the discourse” (Genette 228; Bal 41, 42); Prince uses the two terms interchangeably to mean “A narrative embedded within another narrative and, more particularly, within the PRIMARY NARRATIVE” (“metadiegetic narrative”).

6. Hutcheon and McHale offer the best introductions to the various uses and abuses of history in postmodern fiction. See Hutcheon (APOP 87-123), and McHale (PF 84-96).

Chapter 4

Authentication Authority in *Mason & Dixon*

We must consider how very little history there is; I mean real authentick history. That certain Kings reigned, and certain battles were fought, we can depend upon as true; but all the colouring, all the philosophy, of history is conjecture.—Samuel Johnson

In construing his story as a history of the fictional world of the novel, the Reverend makes the issue of his narrative authority the central factor in reconstructing what Doležel calls the fictional encyclopedia: “the stores of knowledge about possible worlds constructed by fictional texts” (FW 206). While reconstructing the fictional encyclopedia is necessarily a part of reading any work of fiction, postmodern encyclopedic narratives foreground this usually implicit procedure. Doležel stresses its importance with regard to all texts: “the fictional encyclopedia is a global condition of the recovery of implicit meaning. All our interpretive decisions and the entire reconstruction of the fictional world are guided by this cognitive resource” (FW 208). Pynchon’s fiction occupies a significant position with regard to Doležel’s concept of the fictional encyclopedia. His work, particularly *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon*, is encyclopedic in both its elaborately detailed construction of elaborate fictional worlds as well as in its incorporation of information from the actual world encyclopedia; in their complexity,

these novels present an extraordinary challenge to the reader who would attempt to reconstruct their fictional encyclopedias.

Though Doležel argues that reliance on the actual world encyclopedia in reconstructing fictional encyclopedias leads to a misreading of many fictional worlds (H 181), Michael Kearns reasonably suggests that reliance on the actual world encyclopedia “constitutes the default case” of most readings (57). One assumes the encyclopedia of a fictional world coincides with that of the actual world until one encounters an explicit deviation from the actual world encyclopedia. The suppression of such deviations is typical of classic realist works but is also an important technique in encyclopedic fiction, as seen in Joyce’s faithful representation of the actual Dublin and Melville’s cetology, for instance. In Pynchon’s postmodern encyclopedic works, the extensive incorporation of actual world information, especially esoteric information from diverse areas of specialization, signals an implicit acknowledgment of Kearns’s “default case” reading while his modifications of this information, ranging from subtle to outrageous, challenge the reader’s reliance on actual world information.

Doležel’s fictional encyclopedia is an element of the possible worlds system of literary semantics he has outlined in numerous articles and most completely in *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds*.¹ This approach provides a framework with which to assess more clearly the Reverend’s role as narrator and to understand what is at stake in evaluating issues of authority in *Mason & Dixon*. Noting that “Literary theoreticians—with a few exceptions—have treated the problem of truth in fiction rather nonchalantly,” Doležel attempts to correct this tendency by “incorporat[ing] the problem of truth into the framework of *literary* semantics, i.e., into an empirical theory of meaning

production in fictional texts” (TAN 23). To that end, Doležel concludes that “in narrative semantics the concept of truth has to be based on the concept of authentication, a concept which explains fictional existence” (TAN 23). Doležel treats the sentences of a fictional text as performative speech acts in J. L. Austin’s sense—speech acts that do something, in this case, construct a fictional world. The speech acts which make up a fictional text are uttered under varying felicity conditions as shaped by the narrative; authentication is the process by which performative speech acts in the form of literary texts change “a possible entity into a fictional fact” (Doležel H 146). While the phrase “fictional fact” may at first sound vaguely like an oxymoron if not nonsense, it is a concept implicit in any reader’s attempt to reconstruct accurately the world constructed by a fictional text; anyone who took a true-or-false test in a grade school English class has made use of the concept.² Both the importance and the difficulty of determining fictional facts are made clear in *Mason & Dixon* on the frequent occasions when the Reverend straightforwardly describes seemingly fantastic events or entities in the course of his narrative, forcing the reader to evaluate the ontological status of these elements of the Reverend’s narrative, whether, in McHale’s words, they are “literal reality” or “metaphorical vehicle.” As seen in the earlier example of the Jesuit Coach in which the Reverend rides to Octarara, the reader must evaluate whether the statement is factual in the context of the fictional world of the novel, i.e., whether or not it is a fictional fact (Pynchon M&D 354).

Fictional facthood is established through authentication; the authority to authenticate rests with the narrators of fictional texts and to a much lesser extent with the characters (Doležel H 149-50). In much fiction, this makes for a relatively simple method of authentication: “entities introduced in the discourse of the anonymous third-

person narrator are *eo ipso* authenticated as fictional facts” (Doležel H 149). Thus, the problem of reliability so pervasive in the hypodiegesis of the Reverend’s tale is remarkably absent from the diegesis of the framing narrative. When the narrative moves from diegesis to hypodiegesis, the move from third-person narration to first-person with the introduction of the Reverend as narrator also introduces the gray area of the “relatively authentic” between the two poles of “fully authentic” and “nonauthentic” (Doležel H 152-53). The difference in authentication authority between third-person and first-person narrators can be described by saying, “somewhat metaphorically, that while the authoritative narrator received the authentication authority by fiat, the *Ich*-narrator [first-person] must earn it” (Doležel H 154).³ The authentication authority for *Er*-form narrators rests on “the same grounding as any other performative authority—convention. In the actual world, this authority is given by social, mostly institutional, systems; in fiction, it is inscribed in the norms of the narrative genre” (Doležel H 149). As might be expected in a work by Pynchon, the area between the binary poles of the authentication function are explored in depth through the course of the Reverend’s narration.⁴

Doležel cites two main strategies that first-person narrators use to establish the “privileged knowledge” on which their authority to authenticate fictional entities rests: “delimiting the scope of this knowledge and identifying its sources” (H 155); ironically, these two activities are precisely what the Reverend often refuses to do in recounting his history. While he often does provide sources and occasionally indicates the limitations of his knowledge, the Reverend is equally likely to provide no explanation for the source of his narrative, thus oscillating from one pole to the other on the scale of authentication, challenging his listeners and the reader to adjust their reconstructions of the world he

describes accordingly. In addition, a number of other conflicting factors operate to support and challenge the Reverend's authentication authority. Most notably, the various family members who are his listeners—the hypodiegetical narratees—challenge the Reverend's statements, at times calling into question his reliability and thus his authentication authority; even more often, however, they fail to question his fantastic claims: they are unfazed by the Learned English Dog, Vaucanson's Duck, tales of Kastoranthropy and giant cheeses, and so on. Much more effective than Dixon's military-style dress, the Reverend's "Representation of Authority," the process by which he earns and maintains his authentication authority, is dramatized throughout the outer-frame episodes of *Mason & Dixon* as well as in his style of narration in the hypodiegesis.

Legal Authority: Hearsay and Undocumented Evidence

The most frequent challenges to the Reverend's authentication authority from his listeners are based on legal standards of authority; the most common of these might be termed the "hearsay objection" because it is consistently voiced by Ives LeSpark, an attorney, and the nature of the challenge is so typical of the Reverend's characterization of lawyers. The epigraph to chapter 35, an excerpt from the Reverend's *Christ and History* that is destined to be at the top of the list of the "'canon' of quotables you should turn to on every possible occasion" when discussing *Mason & Dixon*, provides a concise statement of both the Reverend's attitude toward lawyers as well as the most complete statement of his philosophy of history (McHoul 159):

Facts are but the Play-things of lawyers,—Tops and Hoops, forever

a-spin. . . . Alas, the Historian may indulge no such idle Rotating. History is not Chronology, for that is left to Lawyers,—nor is it Remembrance, for Remembrance belongs to the People. History can as little pretend to the Veracity of the one, as claim the Power of the other,—her Practitioners, to survive, must soon learn the arts of the quidnunc, spy, and Taproom Wit,—that there may ever continue more than one life-line back into a Past we risk, each day, losing our forebears in forever,—not a Chain of single Links, for one broken Link could lose us All,—rather, a great disorderly Tangle of Lines, long and short, weak and strong, vanishing into a Mnemonick Deep, with only their Destination in common.

(Pynchon M&D 349)

Unsurprisingly, the Reverend's history of Mason and Dixon diverges from the form Blair prescribes and takes an encyclopedic form: episodic, Menippean, spreading out synchronically and diachronically across their culture. In fact, the Reverend's particular metaphor makes an important distinction between history as he practices it and the standard practice of history that Blair defines. For Blair, the foremost qualities required of history are unity and order; given these qualities, "We should be able to trace all the secret links of the chain, which binds together remote, and seemingly unconnected events" (395; lect. 35). The metaphorical shape the Reverend proposes for history, "not a Chain [. . .],—rather, a great disorderly Tangle of Lines," is the rhizomatic shape of the encyclopedia, in direct opposition to Blair's metaphor. Eco, following Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's conception of the rhizome, states that the first two characteristics of such a structure are that "(a) Every point of the rhizome can and must be connected with

every other point. (b) There are no points or positions in a rhizome; there are only lines” (SPL 81). However, though pictured in terms of lines, the metaphoric space that the Reverend describes and the rhizome it resembles should not be confused with the Line that occupies so much of the novel; the two are entirely opposed. Where the encyclopedism of the Reverend’s history is meant to suggest a great tree of connections, the Line, a manifestation of legal authority, disconnects and divides.

Ives states his opposition to the Reverend’s conception of history in the scene which follows this epigraph, an argument joined *in medias res* with Ives and Ethelmer⁵ offering their competing philosophies of history: “‘Why,’ Uncle Ives insists, ‘you look at the evidence. The testimony. The whole Truth’” (Pynchon M&D 349). These two positions, Ives in support of the idea of a single objective history or “Truth” with a capital-T based on legal standards of evidence and testimony, the Reverend and Ethelmer on the side of a more personal, subjective history from multiple perspectives, are the poles of another binary opposition, analogous to the one Doležel uses to define his authentication function. In its simplest, dyadic form, found in texts made up of “the narrative of an anonymous, impersonal narrator and the direct speech of the fictional person(s),” the authentication function excludes the middle ground of relative authenticity for the either/or opposition of authentic/non-authentic (Doležel H 148). However, Doležel explains, “The authentication force of subjective narrative modes cannot be explained by a two-value function” since the narrator’s subjectivity introduces much more complexity into the authentication equation and lacks the performative force of the impersonal, third-person narrator’s authoritative narrative (H 152).⁶ Thus, for texts with anything other than an undramatized third-person narrator, the middle ground of

relative authenticity cannot be excluded; on the contrary, it is on exactly these grounds that the authentication of entities in a first-person narrative is determined.

In the epigraph to chapter 35, the Reverend suggests that history, like first-person narratives in Doležel's scheme, is always subjective and is therefore always relatively authentic; only a multiplicity of lines into the past makes it useful. In contrast, Ives supports the idea of a single objective history established by "the evidence. The testimony. The whole Truth" and admonishes his son, "No one has time, for more than one Version of the Truth" (Pynchon M&D 350). Thus, Ives implicitly labels the Reverend's narrative a romance or, even worse, a novel, one of "these irresponsible narratives, that will not distinguish between fact and fancy" (Pynchon M&D 351). The Reverend, on the other hand, as a pluralist, insists on his activity as a legitimate form of history, though by no means does he offer his narrative as the single authoritative History or "Truth." While he does not claim complete authority, he does claim authority; neither his narrative as a whole nor certain fantastic elements within it can be jettisoned without evaluating the consequences such a reading would have for the fictional world of the novel as a whole. The problem is not to draw a line between history and fantasy but to determine the consequences of either accepting or rejecting the Reverend's authority.

The hearsay objections, the most common of several types of challenges to the Reverend's authentication authority, occur occasionally throughout the outer frame scenes and illustrate the continuing debate over the opposing philosophies of history between the Reverend and Ives LeSpark, joined from time to time by others. The first of these hearsay objections occurs early in the Reverend's narrative as Mason and Dixon leave Cape Town for St. Helena. The Reverend concedes that "St. Helena was a part of

the Tale that I miss'd," thus seeking to bolster his authentication authority by "delimiting the scope" of his knowledge (Pynchon M&D 105). After some brief raillery back and forth between the Reverend and J. Wade LeSpark, Ives voices his objection: "'Then how are we ever to know what happen'd to the three of 'm upon that little-known Island?' Uncle Ives a bit smug, ev'ryone thinks" (Pynchon M&D 105). Even as the Reverend attempts to guarantee the authenticity of his narrative by demonstrating his honesty, Ives calls the guarantee into question on its very basis: admitting he was not there may demonstrate the Reverend's honesty, but it also demonstrates the inauthenticity in absolute terms of the narrative he is introducing. However, Ives's suggestion that the Reverend cannot provide an accurate, faithful history beyond a reasonable doubt without first-hand knowledge completely fails to phase the Reverend, and his smugness receives a cool reception from the others, who seem to understand implicitly that neither the Reverend's nor any history could be based solely on one's own eyewitness testimony. In the face of Ives's hearsay objection, the Reverend begins by offering a brief summary of the facts known about Maskelyne and his situation on St. Helena. From these facts and the reports he has heard from Mason and Dixon, the Reverend constructs and extrapolates his narrative, the authenticity of which he has succeeded in at least partially establishing, before he even begins, due to his own honesty as well as his unflappable response to the mocking attack on his authenticating authority by Ives.

Unsurprisingly, given the Reverend's historical method, the hearsay objection is heard again quickly as the Reverend continues the tale on St. Helena, though next it comes from the Twins. Uncle Ives rewards Pitt and Pliny each with a pistole and recommends they invest it toward future careers as attorneys when they question the

Reverend's authority in quoting "a letter to Dixon he [Mason] then decides not to send" (Pynchon M&D 146). Despite the unlikelihood of his having any knowledge of a letter Mason did not send at a time when the Reverend was halfway around the globe, the Reverend makes no response at all to the objection, ignoring the interruption (which comes in the form of a parenthetical interpolation in the hypodiegesis from the primary narrative) and continuing with his story. Ives himself objects on several more occasions, as when he points out the lack of any records of Mason's marriage to his first wife, Rebekah (171); when he questions whether Dixon accompanied Mason to Lancaster Town (341); when he questions the Reverend's assumptions concerning Dixon's trip through Maryland and Virginia, asking, "There are no *Documents*, Wicks?" (Pynchon M&D 393); and when he declares, "No proof," as the Reverend begins to tell of Dixon's encounter with the Slave-Driver (Pynchon M&D 695). The Reverend's unconcerned responses to each of these challenges—suggesting that records may appear in the future; citing Dixon's unconfirmed testimony; "postulat[ing] two Dixons" (Pynchon M&D 393)—demonstrate the lack of concern he consistently shows for Ives's objections. While these challenges do serve to point out that the Reverend's tale is not entirely supported by direct historical evidence—"Documents," in Ives's words—they do not seriously diminish his authenticating authority because the Reverend's authenticating authority is a function of his performance. As the Reverend argues when Ives doubts the historicity of Dixon's beating the Slave-Driver, facts, chronology, and evidence make up the least important elements of the history he is relating and are only minor factors in establishing his reliability:

“No proof,” declares Ives. “No entries for Days, allow’d,—but yet no proof.”

“Alas,” beams the Rev^d, “must we place our unqualified Faith in the Implement [the Driver’s Lash], as the Tale accompting for its Presence,—these Family stories have been perfected in the hellish Forge of Domestick Recension, generation ’pon generation, till what survives is the pure truth, anneal’d to Mercilessness, about each Figure, no matter how stretch’d, nor how influenced over the years by all Sentiments from unreflective love to inflexible Dislike.”

“Don’t leave out Irresponsible Embellishment.”

“Rather, part of the common Duty of Remembering,—surely our Sentiments,—how we dream’d of, and were mistaken in, each other,—count for at least as much as our poor cold Chronologies.” (Pynchon M&D 695-6)

The Reverend’s earnestness, even if it is read as mock-sincerity, in the face of Ives’s cynicism and sarcasm further secures his authentication authority even as he admits the possibility of historical inaccuracy on a purely technical level. The “beam[ing]” Reverend welcomes Ives’s call for “proof” as an opportunity to reject lack of documentation as a possible criticism of his reliability and, further, as the basis for an allegedly rational or scientific approach to history. The Reverend looks outside of more conservative, traditional historical sources to oral history and elsewhere for support.

In affirming the place of “Irresponsible Embellishment” in history, the Reverend suggests that since history is always already subjective, the subjectivity should be

celebrated rather than suppressed. Here, as in his other comments on history, the Reverend demonstrates that he is operating outside the bounds of conventional history. In fact, the Reverend's method shares much in common with the postmodern fiction of which he is a product and that Hutcheon refers to as historiographic metafiction. However, the novel itself provides a much older alternative context for the kind of history the Reverend practices when the authoritative outer-frame narrator introduces the Reverend's tale for the children as another in "an Herodotic Web of Adventures and Curiosities selected, the Rev^d implies, for their moral usefulness" (Pynchon M&D 7). This context is expanded when Ethelmer contrasts "Mr. Gibbon's sort of History, in ev'ry way excellent" with that of "Jack Mandeville, Captain John Smith, even unto Baron Munchausen of our own day,—Herodotus being the God-Father of all [. . .]" (Pynchon M&D 349-50). It is not simply the inclusion of seemingly fantastic entities and events of doubtful veracity, however, that makes the Reverend's history "Herodotic." The *Histories* of Herodotus are one of the earliest examples of encyclopedic narrative and can also be read as the first example of historiographic metafiction. Donald Lateiner's description of the *Histories* could apply just as well to the Pynchon's style: "Anecdotic, dialogic, novelistic, digressive, the style of Herodotus' historical discourse sometimes bewilders the seeker of plain fact but always intrigues the student of complex literary structures" (31). As Herodotus himself explains, his work "has from the beginning sought out the supplementary to the main argument" (281; 4.30); in addition to his digressiveness, Lateiner has in mind the structure of the *Histories*, including Herodotus' use of embedded narratives and his avoidance of chronological organization in favor of "a 'symptomatic' variety [of historiography], a method that connects more than it

explains, analogizes more than it analyses” (212, 167). This loose, thematic structure has, of course, contributed to the many criticisms of the *Histories* as history, but David Grene, in language which echoes the Reverend’s own conception of history, argues that the *Histories* should in fact be considered “a kind of history. We dare say that, now that military and political history is no longer looked on as the sole lifeline by which to connect ourselves to great events of the past. But it is a history that nearly always suggests the observer within the framework” (12). Like the Reverend, who reports events he witnessed but usually effaces himself in his telling of these events, Grene describes Herodotus as “a storyteller who is never quite out of the frame of the narrative and never quite within it” (12).

Given this company, the Reverend is open to attack as a historical relativist at best, a mere fabulist at worst; however, he does not go so far as to equate history with fiction. His is perhaps an extreme example of White’s relativist position, which Doležel identifies as the most formidable expression of the “poststructuralist, postmodernist challenge to the integrity of history,” before proceeding to use as a straw man in his attack on historical relativism (FHN 248).⁷ White states his position quite succinctly: “There is an inexpungeable relativity in every representation of historical phenomena. The relativity of the representation is a function of the language used to describe and thereby constitute past events as possible objects of explanation and understanding” (HEPT 37).

The Reverend’s position demonstrates a very self-conscious awareness of the hybrid nature of history, in sharp contrast to Ives’s view, which is analogous to that of the “proper historian” who “seeks to explain what happened in the past by providing a

precise and accurate reconstruction of the events reported in documents” (White TD 52). In the Reverend’s formulation, history is neither this simple kind of “Chronology” nor the more complex “Remembrance” of the people, and it survives only through “the arts of the quidnunc, spy, and Taproom Wit.” White similarly envisions a hybrid history which “because it is founded on an awareness of the *similarities* between art and science, rather than their differences, can be properly designated neither” (TD 29); he goes on to emphasize the similarities of history and fiction writing and the historian’s use of the fiction writer’s devices: “Although historians and writers of fiction may be interested in different kinds of events, both the forms of their respective discourses and their aims in writing are often the same. In addition, in my view, the techniques or strategies that they use in the composition of their discourses can be shown to be substantially the same” (TD 121). The Reverend self-consciously exploits the similarity of the historian’s and fiction writer’s techniques in a way that, while unconventional in history, is a staple of the postmodern literature of which the novel is an example and is specifically analogous to the narrator’s undermining of his authority through self-parody in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Despite the Reverend’s use of techniques conventionally considered inappropriate to history, his claim of historical authority should not be dismissed without further consideration. White cites *Maus*, for instance, Art Spiegelman’s comic book history of the Holocaust, as “one of the most moving accounts of it that I know” and adds that even given its depiction of Jews as mice, Germans as cats, and its comic book format, while “*Maus* is not a conventional history . . . it is a representation of past real events or at least events that are represented as having actually occurred” (HEPT 41).⁸ This is certainly no

more—and no less—than the Reverend claims for his narrative: “a representation of past real events” of the novel’s fictional world.

At the same time that the Reverend subjects his authentication authority to “Personal Assault” by incorporating undocumented events, depending on “Family stories” for evidence, and drawing attention to the unconventional nature of his method, his postulations and assumptions are grounded on first-hand experience as well as a respect for and complete knowledge of the more traditional historical materials that are available to him, a scrupulousness which the litigious Ives must acknowledge on several occasions. As the Reverend recounts Tom Hynes’s attempt to repossess his baby from the baby’s mother, Ives interrupts to confirm the Reverend’s faithfulness in this case to the legal authority of the official historical record: “That, incidentally, is the Exclamation verbatim [. . .]—see *Proceedings of the Council of Maryland*, for the Year ’sixty-five. Your Uncle has been telling the story as depos’d much later by people wishing to have Shelby dismiss’d as a Peace Officer [. . .]” (Pynchon M&D 579). Ives’s comment indicates the very problem with his own criteria for historical accuracy: he may argue that to discover the historical Truth, “you look at the evidence. The testimony. The whole Truth,” but in discussing the case of Captain Shelby, he himself points out that the evidence, testimony, even the documents themselves are subjective and thus only as reliable as their sources. As the Reverend puts it, “Facts are but the Play-things of lawyers,—Tops and Hoops, forever a-spin. . . .”

Ives, of course, does not acknowledge the relativism inherent in history and historical documents; he intermittently maintains his position in support of an objective version of history based on legal authority as the Reverend’s gadfly throughout the

narrative. However, as the Reverend's story nears its end, Ives has been worn down by the encyclopedic force of the Reverend's narration: the same character who midway through the novel heatedly rejected Ethelmer's endorsement of history as practiced by "Jack Mandeville, Captain John Smith, even to Baron Munchausen of our own day" and protested vociferously against the "Novel" because of the "alarming number of young persons, most of them female, seduced across the sill of madness by these irresponsible narratives, that will not distinguish between fact and fancy" now encourages speculation. As the Reverend quotes a letter from Nevil Maskelyne to Mason, Ives interrupts:

"What was he talking about?"

"In Maskelyne's Letter, which we have, he says he's responding to a letter of Mason's dated October fifteenth, which no one can locate, including me,—indeed, I've not found any of Mason's Letters, tho' there are said to be many about."

"Make something up, then,—Munchausen would."

"Not when there exists, somewhere, a body of letters Mason really did write. I must honor that, mustn't I, Brother Ives?"

Ives snorts and chooses not to contend.

"Why not gamble they'll never be found?" wonders Ethelmer.

"Just because I can't find them doesn't mean they're not out there.

The Question may be rather,—Must we wait till they are found, to speculate as to the form 'moral reflections' upon a ten-foot telescope, with a Micrometer, might take?" (Pynchon M&D 720)

In this exchange, Ives displays more interest in the continuation of the narrative at this point than with continuing to quibble over the epistemological doubt and lack of authentication authority inherent in the Reverend's historical method or, for that matter, in any historical method.⁹ He gives up his self-appointed role as the Reverend's historical watchdog or prosecuting attorney in favor of simply listening. Noting this, the Reverend responds with a mocking reversal of positions aimed at "Brother Ives." The Reverend and Ives are not, of course, brothers-in-law, though use of the appellation would perhaps not be too unusual; more importantly, however, the Reverend's mock-formal use of "Brother" indicates the satire in his sudden adoption of the lawyer's standards for history—the search for facts and chronology, the demand for testimony and evidence being of the utmost importance. The Reverend's comment indicates that Ives is being inconsistent in the application of his principles, principles that depend on consistency for their value. According to these standards, one must postpone judgment or, in this case, conclusions about the contents of Mason's letter until the letter itself is discovered. By this point, however, Ives is not up to the challenge.¹⁰ His complacency in response to the Reverend's barb sharply contrasts his earlier smugness in making his first objection. Ethelmer, who apparently has not grasped the Reverend's chiding of Ives, reiterates his support for an approach to history in the "Herodotic" tradition, and in the end, the Reverend does proceed to "Make something up, then," though he grounds his speculation on a close reading of the available evidence as well as his knowledge of Mason's character and life. While Ives has submitted rather than been convinced, the Reverend has by this point further legitimated his method, thus increasing his authentication authority.

The Implied Lawyer

Drawing conclusions based on all of the available evidence, including but not limited to his first-hand knowledge of Mason and Dixon, is the Reverend's method throughout the novel as well as the method of the implied author insofar as the Reverend serves as a surrogate for the implied author. The Reverend's immediate audience—the hypodiegetic narratees—likewise serve as surrogates for the implied reader, raising an interesting point: the several narratees have widely varying perspectives and offer widely conflicting readings of the Reverend's tale in their occasional reactions and interjections; with all of them as surrogates, the flesh-and-blood reader is exposed to a broad spectrum of possible reactions and interpretations. Each of these readings, however, has already been characterized by its inclusion and treatment in the novel. The Reverend's efforts to overrule objections from his listeners are also applicable to the reader's possible objections. Thus, a reading typified by the hearsay objection and a desire for historical "proof" or a fully authenticated narrative is portrayed as shortsighted and immature through Ives's smugness, the employment of the hearsay objection by the Twins, the Reverend's consistent failure to take objections seriously, as well as his chiding of Ives for abandoning his standards. Further caricaturing such a reading is the novel's consistently satirical depiction of lawyers: Ives himself suggests that the Twins' investment of the pistoles he gives them could be useful "when you're established enough as Attorneys to need a friendly Judge now and then. Be better of course if you were partners. Confuse people" (Pynchon M&D 146). In response, Pitt suggests that one brother will lead "a Wastrel's Life, whilst the other applies himself diligently to the

Law,” only to have Aunt Euphrenia rejoin, “—making it even less possible to tell you apart” (Pynchon M&D 146). Perhaps most condemning is Captain Shelby’s story of how Philadelphia lawyers are able to abuse even “the old Gentleman,” condescending so far as to chat with him on the condition that “Those would, of course, be billable hours” (Pynchon M&D 607). At the same time Ives argues sincerely in favor of an objective and verifiable historical “Truth” (Pynchon M&D 349), the novel, both in the Reverend’s hypodiegesis and in the outer frame diegesis, consistently characterizes lawyers, particularly of the Philadelphia variety, as experts in obfuscating and distorting historical facts.

Much of the novel’s satire of lawyers has its source in the Reverend, both as intradiegetic character in the primary narrative and as hypodiegetic narrator of the embedded narrative. The Reverend, after all, relates Captain Shelby’s story to his listeners and the reader. The Reverend’s depiction of lawyers further supports reading his treatment of Ives’s objections as evidence of an implicit concern over his authentication authority. While the Reverend is not concerned with establishing his narrative as *the* authoritative version, he is very much concerned with establishing it as *an* authoritative version and with assailing any other version that sets itself up as *the* authoritative version or that would deny his version, as Ives promotes the legal version of history. In discussing the problematic role of narrative in history, White notes that “once we have been alerted to the intimate relationship that Hegel suggests exists between law, historicity, and narrativity, we cannot but be struck by the frequency with which narrativity, whether of the fictional or the factual sort, presupposes the existence of a legal system against which or on behalf of which the typical agents of a narrative

militate” (CF 13). The conflict between Ives and the Reverend, good-natured and humorous as it may be, remains a case of the Reverend’s having militated against and Ives on behalf of a legal foundation of authority. White argues that “narrative in general, from the folktale to the novel, from the annals to the fully realized ‘history,’ has to do with the topics of law, legality, legitimacy, or, more generally, authority” (CF 13). The Reverend, one of history’s unconventional and possibly subversive “Practitioners,” must gain his authentication authority at the expense of the official authority represented by Ives’s support of legal standards of authority. The Reverend’s implicit strategy, in contrast to that of the narrator of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, is non-confrontational: it is part of his “*parsonickal Disguise*.” The result is an authentication authority like the “conditional and contingent” authority Patterson identifies in Franklin’s Poor Richard, allowing a reciprocal “conditional and contingent” autonomy on the part of his audience (xxi). By admitting the impossibility of fully authenticating his history, the Reverend allows the listeners and readers to determine the relative authenticity of his narrative.

“Irresponsible Embellishment”

The hearsay objection is by no means the only basis on which the hypodiegetic narratees challenge the Reverend’s authority. While Ives monitors the narrative for hearsay, Tenebræ, in particular, is attuned to the Reverend’s tendency to exaggerate. She points out the Reverend’s hyperbole even as the tale is beginning. Hearing the Reverend describe himself as “stoven, dismasted, imbécile with age,” “‘Uncle,’ Tenebræ pretends to gasp, ‘and but this Morning, you look’d so much younger,—why I’d no idea’” (Pynchon M&D 8). To her sarcastic accusation, the Reverend responds, “Kindly Brae.

That is from my Secret Relation, of course. Don't know that I'd phrase it quite like that in the present Company" (Pynchon M&D 8). The Reverend subsequently removes the "scarr'd old Note-book, cover'd in cheap Leather" from which he reads the tale that makes up the novel's hypodiegesis; the move to his Note-book is typical of "Many traditional Ich-forms . . . [which] reinforce the narrator's authority by adopting a genre of natural (nonliterary) discourse: letter, journal, diary, memoir, manuscript . . ." (Doležel H 156). By resorting to his Note-book, the Reverend does more than just reinforce his authority, however. The Reverend's response to Tenebræ and subsequent action also imply two factors that further complicate the matter of the Reverend's reliability: first, that the composition of the Reverend's audience affects the form of his tale (which in turn affects the form of the hypodiegesis the reader encounters); second, that the Note-book he reads from is an already edited version of the history it presents which he edits even further as he reads from it. Even if he is only joking about the "Secret Relation" in response to Tenebræ's accusation of hyperbole, the Reverend still reveals that the story contained in his Note-Book is only a version of the events in Mason and Dixon's career and perhaps a somewhat whitewashed version at that. Rather than decreasing his authentication authority, however, the Reverend's admission acts as a demonstration of his honesty.

An objection may be made here that, on the contrary, rather than demonstrating his honesty and foregrounding the relative authenticity of his own version as well as any version of history, the Reverend's response to Tenebræ is the first in a long line of signals to listeners and readers alike that do exactly the opposite, namely, demonstrate the Reverend's dishonesty and the complete nonauthenticity (to use Doležel's term) of his

narrative. This objection is justified and even necessitated by the placement of the Reverend's narrative firmly in the metaphoric space of the relatively authentic. However, some may view the Reverend's history as akin to what narratologists label a *skaz*-narrative. *Skaz*-narrative is "fashioned to give the illusion of spontaneous speech" and is "told in language that is typical of the fictional NARRATOR (as opposed to the AUTHOR) and is firmly set in a communication framework. The manner of the telling . . . is as important to the effect of the narrative as the situations and events recounted" (Prince 88). Doležel adds to this definition by emphasizing the disabling effect *skaz* has on the process of fictional world construction. Doležel classifies *skaz*-narrative as a type of self-voiding narrative, analogous to an insincere performative speech act: "In *skaz*-narrative the authentication force is undermined by irony. *Skaz* is a ludic narrative act, a noncommittal, nonbinding play with world construction" (H 161). The Reverend's narrative act is ludic to a great degree; additionally, despite the presence of the Notebook from which he reads his narrative, the Reverend improvises both by omitting certain elements and by incorporating new material, such as when J. Wade LeSpark informs him that he had met Mason and Dixon at the Lepton Ridotto (Pynchon M&D 410). However, the Reverend's playfulness and improvisation do not invalidate his authentication authority; quite the contrary, the Reverend uses his playfulness to insist upon his authentication authority as seen in his mockery of Ives; in the case of the Lepton Ridotto, J. Wade LeSpark's independent verification further supports the authentication of the episode which otherwise would depend entirely on the Reverend's reporting that Mason and Dixon went "on about it for weeks after" (Pynchon M&D 410).

The rule of the Reverend's overall commitment and sincerity in his narrative is perhaps best demonstrated by the most glaring instance of "nonbinding play with world construction." This exception occurs when the Reverend, in a serious tone and manner and with the added appeal to authority of "produc[ing] and mak[ing] available to the Company his Facsimile of Pennsylvania's Fair Copy of the Field-Journals of Mason and Dixon," proposes to the family that the recurrence of eleven day periods during the astronomers' stay in America "suggest[s] a hidden Root common to all. And Friends, I believe 'tis none but the famous Eleven Missing Days of the Calendar Reform of '52" (Pynchon M&D 554). The response from his listeners is the only occasion in the novel when there is a collective and instantaneous expression of disbelief: "Cries of 'Cousin? We beseech thee!' and 'Poh, Sir!'" (Pynchon M&D 555). The Reverend continues, however, even admonishing, "Pull not such long faces, young Ethelmer" (Pynchon M&D 555). In the end, the Reverend's discussion of this "chronologick Wound" turns out to be a set up for the shaggy-dog story Mason tells Dixon of being stuck in "that very Whirlpool in Time" (Pynchon M&D 555, 556), revealed as a joke only at its conclusion when Dixon, on the verge of accepting the story as genuine, realizes, "Eeh! I am the Sniffer sniff'd, as Parker said when he put his Head in the Bear's Den . . . ?" (Pynchon M&D 561). The Reverend, in relating this story to his family, takes advantage of the authority he has established and goes even further by actually displaying the supposed source of his conjecture, an artifact for them to hold, in order to increase his chances of taking in his listeners. While he clearly meets the definition of a *skaz*-narrator here, a distinction should be made. While Mason's story is false and non-authentic, the Reverend's reporting of it is fully authentic—that is, there is no reason to suspect that

Mason did not tell this story to Dixon, or that he did not tell it in this particular way; the Reverend's set-up of the story reproduces for his listeners the spirit of Mason's original telling. Thus, even though the Reverend's outer frame dialogue lacks authority, his hypodiegetical narration remains relatively authentic and is even further authenticated by the suspicion that the Reverend would not have gone to the trouble of such an elaborate set up were this not an accurate retelling of an actual exchange between Mason and Dixon. The Reverend displays some characteristics of the *skaz*-narrator, as particularly seen in his performance in introducing Mason's story of the Missing Eleven Days, but even here, as throughout, he is committed to the authentication of his narrative, if not completely committed to the significance of eleven day periods in the astronomers' Field-Journals.

The Reverend's commitment to the world-constructing act of his narration can be seen even more clearly in the case of another accusation of hyperbole from Tenebræ, who again challenges him in the middle of reporting a "traveling sales Representative[s]" careful description of the formation of a ring of cigar smoke in the shape of a Möbius-strip, "like a Length of Ribbon clos'd in a Circle, with a single Twist in it, possessing thereby but one Side and one Edge. . . ." (Pynchon M&D 345). Interrupted by Tenebræ's "Uncle?" the Reverend replies, "Hum? Pray ye,—'tis true, I was not there. Yet, such was the pure original Stogie in its day. . . ." (Pynchon M&D 345). This, like her earlier challenge, seems a rather minor objection to make given some of the Reverend's other claims. The Reverend's response, however, reveals his state of mind as he narrates at a significant point in the text—just prior, that is, to asking, "Does Brittainia, when she sleeps, dream? Is America her dream?" and to recounting the surveyors' visits to the site

of the Lancaster Massacre (Pynchon M&D 345). In describing the smoke ring, the Reverend is clearly absorbed in the telling of his story and in the importance of remaining true to the spirit of that story, if not always the exact facts. More importantly, however, while the Reverend admits he was not present for the events and implicitly concedes that his description of the smoke ring sounds fantastic, he maintains his claim to authenticating authority in reporting these events and specifically denies any exaggeration in his description of the smoke ring, as he has denied, refuted, or simply ignored every other objection to this point. His denial can certainly be taken as insincere by the reader; even if it is taken seriously, whether Tenebræ and his other listeners believe him is doubtful. However, by denying any hyperbole in his description of the smoke ring, a detail in his description of the surveyors' trip to Lancaster that is remarkably minute, even superfluous, as well as extremely unlikely if not impossible, he makes it that much harder for his audience or the reader to challenge the authenticity of the remainder of his account of the trip and, to a lesser extent, the rest of his narrative.

The Reverend's nonchalant insistence on such hard-to-believe details throughout his narrative creates an aura of epistemological doubt around every element of his story. In an interesting reversal of the knowledge-delimiting technique, described by Doležel, that first-person narrators use to establish the privileged knowledge on which their authentication authority rests, the Reverend often seems to know every conceivable detail of every conversation he recounts; the sheer volume of information he has recorded in his Note-book lends him narrative authority at the same time it leads one to question how he could have recorded every single piece of data with such exactitude, not to mention how it could all fit in a single Note-book. The Reverend insists that he can be trusted and that

his account is authoritative, but at times, as with the smoke-ring, he can offer his skeptical readers and listeners only his word and the word of the person who told him—in this case Dixon, whose presence, as Ives points out at the beginning of the chapter, is not documented in the “Field-Record” (Pynchon M&D 341)—as authentication for an event he did not witness. If one insists upon a skeptical reading of the physically impossible or even merely the physically unlikely, such as a one-sided, one-edged smoke ring, then the same skepticism must be brought to bear on the larger scene of which this detail is only a small part: if one places an asterisk next to the smoke ring, marking it as non-authentic, one must do the same with the Reverend’s account of the surveyors’ trip to Lancaster. The Reverend, unwilling to allow such skepticism to grow, responds by insisting upon the possibility, if not the probability, of this detail in order to maintain the moral authority of the rest of his narrative. While this necessarily means that the Reverend cannot fully authenticate the smoke ring or, in fact, any detail, it does not cause major damage to the Reverend’s authority; it is a condition of his being a first-person narrator: “Yet whatever the narrator’s effort, the fictional world of the *Ich*-form narrative will never lose the intentional trace of its subjective origin. To exist in this world is to exist as a more-or-less confirmed virtual” (Doležel H 154). For the Reverend, the ability to authenticate fully the events of his narrative, like the objective truth Ives proposes, is undesirable, though not for the same reasons Ethelmer suggests. In his youthful cynicism, Ethelmer argues, “It may be the Historian’s duty to seek the Truth, yet must he do ev’rything he can, not to tell it” and that “Who claims Truth, Truth abandons. History is hir’d, or coerc’d, only in Interests that must ever prove base” (Pynchon M&D 349). The Reverend’s very narration demonstrates his belief in the historian’s duty to tell

truths, if not Truth; likewise, the epigraph to chapter 35 argues in favor of the necessity of many different versions, “a great disorderly Tangle of Lines” into the past. The Reverend’s narrative can never be fully authenticated; at the same time, by foregrounding this condition—that he cannot be completely believed—and thus subverting his authority like the narrator of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the Reverend earns at least partial or relative authentication for even the most fantastic elements of his tale. As a representation of the actual events, his history must be believed to a certain extent, like Dixon’s “Representation of Authority, whose extent no one is quite sure of”; the extent of the Reverend’s authority can only be determined by an epistemological interrogation of his narrative.

The Reverend’s authentication authority as narrator is the function through which the possible entities and events of the inner frame become fictionally existent. If the Reverend were simply telling an imaginative story—if, like the novel as a whole, the Reverend were constructing a historical *fiction* and his Note-book contained one of what Ives calls those “irresponsible narratives, that will not distinguish between fact and fancy,” than his authentication authority would be less important in understanding the novel. In this case, the Reverend’s narrative would construct a fictional world within a fictional world, with no ontological continuity between the two. While this is a common enough device in postmodern literature and frame stories in general (for example, *The Arabian Nights’ Entertainment*, the *Decameron*, and Pynchon’s own *Gravity’s Rainbow*), in *Mason & Dixon*, the Reverend follows in the path of other narrators of embedded tales who tell of their own worlds (for example, *Wuthering Heights*, *Absalom, Absalom!*). Rather than creating a fictional world in his narration, the Reverend claims to reconstruct

a historical world of the novel's outer frame. The worlds of the outer and inner frames, or the primary and secondary narratives, are thus ontologically continuous; that is to say, according to the Reverend, they are the same world. As a result, if the listeners or readers accept the Reverend's tale as history, any event or entity authenticated in the Reverend's narrative must also be accepted as part of the primary narrative's actual world.

Determining the Reverend's authentication authority and the authentication status of each element of his narrative, therefore, is the key to determining how much of what he presents as history can in fact be accepted as such. Not only is the Reverend's authentication authority important to a complete understanding of the novel, but within the novel, his authority determines whether his listeners accept his narrative as history rather than fiction. His concern that they should accept the narrative as history is behind his reactions to Ives's hearsay objections and Tenebræ's accusations of hyperbole and, as will be discussed later, his narrative style in general. Through the Reverend's evident lack of concern over Ives's objections, his satire of legal authority, and his insistence on the authenticity of even the smallest details, the Reverend lends credence to his own version of the history of Mason and Dixon.

Historical vs. Fictional Narrative

In seeking to rescue history from the "postmodernist challenge" posed by the work of Roland Barthes and Hayden White, among others, Doležel attempts to recast the problem of reference from a possible worlds perspective. The basis of the postmodernist challenge to history as a means of knowing something about the actual world is that "there is a necessary and unbridgeable gap between discourse (writing, representation,

sign) and reality. . . . History, being discourse, suffers from this malaise of signs, from their inability to pass from meaning to the world” (FHN 253). To reestablish the boundary between history and fiction, Doležel takes a different approach: “This paralysis of signification cannot be remedied by a reinterpretation of the concept of discourse but by a new understanding of the notion of world” (FHN 253). For Doležel, both fictional and historical narratives create possible worlds: “historical reconstruction does not recreate the past in actuality, but in represented possibility” (FHN 261). Despite this fundamental similarity, the conventions governing the construction of these two kinds of possible worlds are different. Doležel identifies four major differences: 1) Historical worlds are limited to the physically possible; fictional worlds are not. 2) “The cast of agents in the historical world is determined by the set of agents involved in the past event(s).” 3) “Neither fictional nor historical worlds are inhabited by real, actual people, but by their possible counterparts. Yet there is a major difference between the fictional and historical treatment of transworld identity. Fiction makers practice a radically nonessentialist semantics. . . . The persons of historical worlds—as well as their events, settings, etc.—have to bear documented properties.” 4) “Both fictional and historical worlds are by necessity incomplete,” but the gaps in fictional worlds are of an ontological nature, while “the gaps in historical worlds are epistemological, given by the very limitations of human knowledge” (FHN 256-58). Finally, in an effort to restore the relevance of truth-value in history, Doležel turns to Austin’s theory of speech acts: “Fictional discourse is performative in that it calls a possible world into fictional existence,” while “Historical discourse is a discourse of constatives” which “construct models of the past that exists (existed) prior to the act of writing” (FHN 262). These

rules offer a useful guideline for evaluating whether, within its fictional world setting of the outer frame diegesis, the Reverend's narrative demonstrates the qualities of a fictional or historical discourse.

As a historian in a fictional world, the Reverend is still subject to the same constraints as any actual historian; if his history is to be authenticated, it must present an accurate picture of the fictional world of which he is a part. Within *Mason & Dixon*, for instance, the unnamed author of *The Ghastly Fop*, is under no such constraints since the world of *The Ghastly Fop* is a fictional world (within the fictional world of the novel's primary diegesis). Incidentally, this serial serves as one of the many small details supporting the ontological continuity of the diegesis and hypodiegesis: the Reverend reports Mason reading it in mid-January 1765 when Dixon returns from the site of the Lancaster massacre (347); Tenebræ later finds a copy in Ethelmer's room late in 1786 (526). However, the Reverend's attempt to create a history rather than a fiction is demonstrated most clearly by his careful treatment of the gaps in his narrative. Doležel demonstrates the ontological nature of fictional gaps by borrowing an example from Nicholas Wolterstorff: "We will never know how many children had Lady Macbeth in the worlds of Macbeth. That is not because to know would require knowledge beyond the capacity of human beings. It is because there is nothing of the sort to know" (qtd. in Doležel FHN 258). The same could be said of the gaps in the outer frame of the novel: we will never know the name of Reverend Cherrycoke's father, for instance, nor the color of Whiskers the Cat because there is nothing of the sort to know. However, the Reverend carefully construes the gaps in his narration of the inner frame as epistemological in nature, as seen earlier in his chiding of Ives and subsequent explanation to Ethelmer:

“Just because I can’t find them [Mason’s letters] doesn’t mean they’re not out there. The Question may be rather,—Must we wait till they are found, to speculate as to the form ‘moral reflections’ upon a ten-foot telescope, with a Micrometer, might take?” (Pynchon M&D 720). The Reverend’s answer is no, as any historian’s would be, and, using the language of conjecture, he continues, “Suppose he’d written to Maskelyne,—” (Pynchon M&D 721). The paragraph which follows remains non-authentic as a word-for-word reproduction of Mason’s letter, but the Reverend has made a persuasive argument for it as a relatively authentic approximation of Mason’s letter: “the decision about the factuality of the conjectured events is, so to say, postponed. A critical historian cannot go any further” (Doležel FHN 259). The Reverend’s more general claim to authenticating authority remains unharmed and even increased by this exchange with Ives and Ethelmer, and the epistemological character of this gap in the Reverend’s narrative, far from subverting its validity, further indicates the narrative’s historical nature: if he were constructing a fictional world, he would not be concerned with the implications of just making something up.

The Reverend consistently identifies the gaps in his narrative as epistemological in nature. While in the case of Mason’s letter he makes clear that the contents he proposes are speculative, he is not always so careful in marking his educated guesses as guesses. The ambiguity of the Reverend’s method and the difficulty of determining whether at any given point in the text he claims to be reporting what did in fact happen, what was reported to him as having happened, what he suspects must have happened, what merely might have happened, or even what probably should have happened creates much of the difficulty in evaluating his authentication authority and thus the historicity of

his narrative. As the most serious threat to both his authenticating authority and the historicity of his narrative, the uncertainty of the Reverend's sources is also the challenge he seems most actively concerned with dispelling. Both the uncertainty and the Reverend's concern were glimpsed earlier in his response to Tenebræ's questioning of the smoke ring description: "Pray ye,—'tis true, I was not there. Yet, such was the pure original Stogie in its day. . . ." As in this instance, the Reverend often blithely obscures the source of his narrative, metaphorically blowing smoke in the eyes of his listeners and the reader, contrary to Doležel's assertion that the identification of sources is part of the method by which first-person narrators maintain their authentication authority. His obfuscation of sources is accomplished in great part by his frequent practice of telling stories as if they had not been told to him by another character, that is, turning a hypodiegetic narrative into a pseudodiegetic one, as is the case in this example.¹¹ At the beginning of his description of the surveyors' trip to Lancaster, the Reverend explains that "Dixon told me, that Mason had meant to go alone,—but that at the last moment [. . .] he offer'd to add Muscular Emphasis, tho' Mason seem'd unsure of whether he wanted him there or not" (Pynchon M&D 341). The Reverend's reference to what Dixon told him is his only reference to the transmission of the story. By presenting events he witnessed and those he did not in the same style and effacing the ways in which the latter were transmitted to him, the Reverend resembles the narrator of *Gravity's Rainbow* in his mastery of the reader, though he remains much less aggressive in his mastery and much closer to the teacher-student relationship LeClair tries to find in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

The Reverend does, of course, identify his sources much of the time, and his explanation as he begins the story of Mason and Dixon's first meeting suggests a default

mode which both delimits the scope of his knowledge and identifies its source: “I was not there when they met,—or, not in the usual Way. I later heard from them how they remember’d meeting. I tried to record, in what I then projected as a sort of *Spiritual Day-Book*, what I could remember of what they said,—tho’ ’twas too often abridg’d by the Day’s Fatigue” (Pynchon M&D 14). The Reverend’s method is nearly identical to Boswell’s in writing the *Life of Johnson*, though in de-emphasizing his own presence and the transmission of the story, his method also resembles that of New Journalists such as Tom Wolfe. However, the immediate interruption from the Twins is not an attack on the possible inaccuracy of this method but a sarcastic comment on the Reverend’s hyperbole: “Writing in your sleep, too!” (Pynchon M&D 14). The hypodiegetical narratees are for the most part more than willing to accept the Reverend’s reconstruction of events based on the testimony he recorded after the fact from Mason and Dixon and other members of the Party. In fact, the willingness of his listeners to accept many of the fantastic elements of his narrative, or if not accept than at least not challenge, is perhaps the strongest factor working in favor of the Reverend’s authentication authority from the reader’s perspective. To the extent that the hypodiegetical narratees function as surrogates for the reader, their silences speak even more loudly than their objections since the objections tend to be the minor quibbles discussed earlier which the Reverend casually dismisses.

The actual event of Mason and Dixon’s first meeting, by the time it reaches the reader through the Reverend’s reconstruction, has been distorted from the original by several layers of memory and retelling: from the event itself, to Mason and Dixon’s recollection and telling of that meeting, to the Reverend’s recollection and recording of what they said, to his present reading/retelling and occasional revisions of that recording.

Each layer or stage in this transmission acts as a lens that either refracts and distorts or focuses and clarifies the actual event in question, depending on one's evaluation of the Reverend's authentication authority. Rather than staying in the first person and explaining in indirect discourse what Mason told him, what Dixon said, and so on, or quoting their stories at length as direct discourse as, for instance, the unnamed narrator of *Heart of Darkness* does with Marlowe's tale, the Reverend reconstructs Mason and Dixon's combined memories in the form of a third-person voice that often seems to approach omniscience in the encyclopedic detail it provides, in its ability to employ such a variety of characters as focalizers, and in the extent of its privilege in using these focalizers. At this point, the Reverend's voice approaches very closely the narrator of the primary diegesis and displays "the three essential criteria of mastery" that LeClair identifies with novels of excess, as typified by *Gravity's Rainbow*: "mastery of the world in which they were written, mastery of narrative methods, and mastery of the reader" (LeClair 5). As discussed earlier, this type of voice is characteristic of nearly all of Pynchon's writing; it is the voice of authority, although conditional authority, that Pynchon establishes through encyclopedism.

Molly Hite describes the narrative voice of *Gravity's Rainbow* in terms of Hugh Kenner's "Uncle Charles Principle": "the narrative voice becomes warped by proximity to a character so that it picks up distinctive habits of thought and verbal ties" (143). Though he had *Ulysses* in mind, Kenner's metaphorical description of "a virtuoso of the Uncle Charles Principle" fits in nicely with the dominant metaphor of *Gravity's Rainbow*: "the narrative idiom [is] bent by a person's proximity as a star defined by Einstein will bend passing light" (JV 71). In Pynchon's work, particularly in *Gravity's Rainbow* and

the later novels, this principle extends further than Hite suggests, beyond just characters so that the narrative voice is shaped and pulled off course by its proximity to events, ideas, as well as even images and phrases, resulting in the many digressions and flashbacks that disrupt the linear narrative. In reconstructing the stories he has heard from Mason and Dixon into a pseudodiegetical and primarily third-person account that pretends omniscience and effaces his own role as the listener who heard the stories, the Reverend makes a bid for the authentication authority granted by convention to the extradiegetic, impersonal, third-person narrator. This point of view is likewise typical of conventional historical narratives. The Reverend thus attempts to have things both ways, bolstering the inherent “I was there” eyewitness authority of much of the narrative with the narrative voice of the historian.

Doležel refers to this type of voice as “subjectivized *Er*-form,” consisting of “a mixed texture, blending formal features of third-person narrative with semantic and indexical features of fictional persons’ discourse. . . . Subjectivized *Er*-form constructs fictional facts relativized to a certain person (or group of persons), facts commingled with subjective attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, emotions, and so on” (H 153). The Reverend’s use of the subjectivized *Er*-form becomes clear with a more complete look at the opening of the third chapter:

I was not there when they met,—or, not in the usual Way. I later heard from them how they remember’d meeting. I tried to record, in what I then projected as a sort of *Spiritual Day-Book*, what I could remember of what they said,—tho’ ’twas too often abridg’d by the Day’s Fatigue.

(“Writing in your sleep, too!” cry the Twins.)

O children, I even dream'd in those Days,—but only long after the waking Travesse was done.

Howsobeit,—scarcely have they met in the Saloon of Mason's Inn at Portsmouth, than Mason finds himself coming the Old London Hand, before Dixon's clear Stupefaction with the Town. (Pynchon M&D 14)

Several subtle shifts are noticeable in this beginning. First, in an attempt to establish his authenticating authority, the Reverend foregrounds both his sources for what he expressly identifies as a reconstruction and his honesty in admitting he was not there. The chapter opens at the hypodiegetical level of the Reverend's narrative, which was established at the end of the first chapter.¹² In the first chapter, a clear demarcation is established between inner and outer frame. The Reverend begins his story as a character in the outer frame; his dialogue is quoted and tagged in the same fashion as any other character's. Several paragraphs into his story, however, the diegesis gives way to the hypodiegesis, signaled by a line break after which the Reverend's speech is no longer signaled by quotation marks and is only tagged in the first sentence by a parenthetical interpolation from the outer frame's narrator: "Tho' my Inclination had been to go out aboard an East Indiaman (the Rev^d continues), as that route East travers'd notoriously a lively and youthful World of shipboard Dalliance [. . .]" (Pynchon M&D 10). By the opening of the third chapter, these clear markers are already being blurred, further suggesting the ontological continuity of the primary and secondary narratives: the chapter begins in the hypodiegesis, as soon becomes the general rule, with no introduction from the extradiegetic outer frame narrator. While the Twins' interjection comes in a parenthetical interpolation, thus maintaining a distinction between inner and outer frame, the

Reverend's response is given unmarked as part of the hypodiegesis. Finally, the Reverend's shift from first-person to subjectivized *Er*-form is evident after his "Howsobeit,—" and is further marked by his switch from past to present tense. The shift from first- to third-person also marks the point at which the hypodiegesis becomes pseudodiegetical, i.e., the point at which the Reverend begins narrating the story of Mason and Dixon's first meeting "as if another narrator [or narrators] had not recounted it to him." The narrative continues in this pseudodiegetical mode until the end of the chapter; furthermore, this mode constitutes the default mode for the remainder of the Reverend's narrative. The Reverend prefers the pseudodiegetical subjectivized-*Er* form even when narrating events and conversations he participated in or observed; if the Reverend begins in the first person, he will almost immediately efface himself and later refer to himself in the third person.

Nearly every return from the primary to the secondary or hypodiegetic narrative follows the pattern set in chapter three, with the Reverend reconstructing the event itself and making no reference to the process by which the story has been transmitted. One slight but notable diversion from this pattern occurs in the scene following the family's discussion of novels (352-61). The Reverend uses the first person consistently and without effacing himself in describing his coach ride to meet Mason and Dixon in Octarara, Pennsylvania, until the final paragraph of the chapter, which begins: "What Machine is it," young Cherrycoke later bade himself goodnight, "that bears us along so relentlessly?" (Pynchon M&D 361). In moving from the events in the coach to the Reverend's reflections on these events in his journal, the voice shifts from first-person, present tense to third-person, past tense. Points such as this one, when the narrative voice

shifts suddenly, with no warning and no explanation, create a *de facto* continuity between the frames as well as the narrative voices themselves, despite the typographical gestures toward marking the boundaries—line breaks, parenthetical interpolations—which reoccur occasionally but inconsistently through the course of the novel. In the present example, the absence of these markers suggests that the final paragraph remains part of the hypodiegesis; the Reverend has simply referred to his former writing self in the third-person to emphasize that self's distance from the present reading self. In an alternative reading, despite the absence of a line break, the shift to the third person that follows the Reverend's extended use of first-person is itself the marker indicating a shift from hypodiegesis to diegesis, and the outer frame narrator provides the final paragraph to give the reader a more complete picture of the coach ride's effect on the young Reverend. Both the Reverend and the narrator of the primary diegesis primarily employ the present tense, so the shift in tense offers no clear indication of the narrator. What little of the narrative voice can be heard in the chapter's final paragraph—"young Cherrycoke later bade himself goodnight"—is indistinguishable as either the Reverend or the outer frame narrator and must be read as both voices together: the Reverend modulating from dramatized, self-conscious, first-person narrator-agent to the undramatized, unself-conscious, third-person narrator-observer of the subjectivized-*Er* form; the impersonal and subdued outer frame narrator modulating through proximity to the Reverend under the Uncle Charles Principle.

Conclusion

As discussed earlier, while the Reverend presents his narrative as history, his relativist approach puts him in a theoretical position similar to that of White and in the practical tradition of Herodotus. The Reverend's use of the present tense is also atypical of historical narrative and further demonstrates the unconventional nature of his history. In a sense, his use of the subjectivized *Er*-form naturalizes his narrative as historical discourse while at the same time his use of the present tense marks it as unnatural. These competing tensions in his narration result from his cultivation of relative authentication, between the absolute poles of authentic and non-authentic, and his criticism of claims to absolute authentication. Discussing the narrator's use of the present tense in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Hite argues that the narrator attempts to create a secular history "between the extremes of providential history and no history at all" (99). By using the present tense, Hite writes, "[T]his narrator in effect occupies the action and insists that he is not in the traditional godlike position of looking back on it" (141); he "speaks from inside history" (Hite 133). Hite's construction of history gives it a rhizomatic structure which "has neither outside nor inside" (Eco SPL 81). True "providential history" would require a view from outside the structure, which is impossible, though it is the point of view assigned to extradiegetic third-person narrators of both history and fiction by convention; history that aspires to this kind of objectivity and adopts this point of view "produces an ideological bias" by promoting "'local' and transitory systems of knowledge" as global (Eco SPL 84).

The use of the present tense in *Mason & Dixon* is similar: the Reverend presents his narrative not so much as reconstruction of the past of the novel's fictional world that

he is looking back on as re-enactment of a past that in many ways is still present or can be made present. Though he is looking back on the action, as is evident by the various changes, deletions, and additions he makes in reading from his *Spiritual Day-Book*, the Reverend's subjectivist position on and in history, as well as his spiritual faith, prevents him from assuming "the traditional godlike position." However, the line between the omniscient third-person point of view of traditional historical discourse and the subjectivized focalization that the Reverend employs is a fine one, one he constantly approaches: "I was not there when they met,—or, not in the usual Way," he explains to his listeners, implying that in some *unusual* Way, he *was* there.

The Reverend's use of the subjectivized *Er*-form that dominates his narrative is part of his self-conscious approach to the problems that subjectivity and narrative present to history. The opposing tensions that result suggest that the Reverend, like Samuel Johnson, wants to have things both ways by simultaneously "claim[ing] and disclaim[ing] authority": he claims the authority of a history, not a fiction, for his narrative while at the same time disputing the authority of any one history; he claims the authority of the eyewitness even as he effaces his presence and adopts the voice of the conventional historian; even as he affirms his narrative is history and uses the subjectivized-*Er* form of the historian, however, he stays in present tense, refusing to occupy "the traditional godlike position of looking back on" events when in all other respects that is exactly what he is doing. These various tensions seriously complicate the reader's attempts to distinguish fictional fact from fiction. While sentient mechanical ducks and pot-smoking presidents can easily be explained as "fantastical lies and exaggerations" or the products of a "terribly unreliable narrator," as two early commentators have done, dismissing them

in this way fails to take into account adequately the Reverend's narrative method—his historical method—which relies on the relative authenticity he works hard to maintain (Siegel 439-40; Collado-Rodríguez 501).

In discussing the role of narrative in the tradition of historiography that grew out of 19th century responses to Enlightenment practices and that still continues today, White points out that this approach to history views narrative as a value-neutral form: “This means that what distinguishes ‘historical’ from ‘fictional’ stories is first and foremost their content, rather than their form. . . . This implies that the form in which historical events present themselves to a prospective narrator is found rather than constructed” (CF 27). Throughout his work, White argues strenuously against this ingrained attitude, not with the goal of expunging narrative from history, as some would do (White cites the *Annalistes* as paradigmatic examples of this trend), but in order to emphasize the way the particular narrative form and the historian who constructs it impose meaning on the events narrated:

The constitution of a chronicle as a set of events that can provide the elements of a story is an operation more poetic than scientific in nature. The events may be given, but their functions as elements of a story are imposed upon them—by discursive techniques more tropological than logical in nature. . . . [T]he transformation of a chronicle of events into a story (or congeries of stories) requires a choice among the many kinds of plot structure provided by the cultural tradition of the historian. . . . There is no necessity, logical or natural, governing the decisions to emplot a

given sequence of events as a tragedy rather than as a comedy or romance.

(FR 9)

The Reverend's awareness of the choices available to him as historian and narrator is implicit throughout his performance. Even more, he takes for granted that his audience is also aware of and able to participate in these choices, self-consciously inviting them to join in the process as he comes to the end of the story of Philip Dimdown, the revolutionary who has flirted with Mitzi Redzinger at Knockwood's Inn while disguised as a fop. When Dimdown is soon afterward seized by soldiers, the narrative shifts from the hypodiegetic to the diegetic level and the family members discuss how to emplot the events:

“If we choose to take the Romantic approach,—”

“We must,” appeals Tenebræ. “Of course he was thinking about her. How did they part?”

“Honorably. He kept up the Fop Disguise till the end.”

“Impossible, Uncle. He *must* have let her see . . . somehow . . . at the last moment, so that *then* she might cry, bid him farewell, and the rest.”

“The rest?” Ives alarm'd.

“After she meets someone else.”

“Aaahhgghh!” groans Ethelmer.

“Never ends!” adds Cousin DePugh. (Pynchon M&D 390)

Though Tenebræ argues that the events themselves demand to be emplotted as romance, it is clearly a matter of choice for the Reverend, a choice determined by one's perspective

or, alternatively, by the interpretation one wishes to support. The Reverend's method of representation allows autonomy on the part of the listener while maintaining his own authority.

On another occasion, the audience's objection makes clear the Reverend's self-conscious emplotment of events. Introducing the Dixon's confrontation with the Slave Driver, the Reverend explains that "Only now, far too late, does Mason develop a passion for his co-adjutor, comparable to that occurring between Public-School Students in England.—" only to be interrupted: "'Oh, please Wicks spare us, far too romantick really,' mutter several voices at once" (Pynchon M&D 697). In response, he reformulates his description: "Say then, that Mason at last came to admire Dixon for his Bravery" (Pynchon M&D 698). During Dixon's earlier trip to Virginia, the Reverend explains that "The Stamp Act has re-assign'd the roles of the Comedy, and the Audience are in an Uproar" (Pynchon M&D 395). The choices the Reverend makes regarding how to "spin" the events he recounts are based on convincing his audience that what they are hearing has been, in Boswell's words but also in Doležel's sense, "authentically communicated."

The authenticity of the Reverend's story and the authentication of the events, entities, and descriptions within it depend upon the narrative authority of the Reverend's performance. The Reverend uses his authority to make his narrative authentic in the same way an actor attempts to make his or her portrayal of a role authentic. I began the previous chapter by comparing the Reverend's and Dixon's "Representation[s] of Authority" to the description an unspecified member of the Collectivity, during Mason's trip to New York, gives of "Mr. Garrick, who in 'representing' a rôle, becomes the

character, as by some transfer of soul.” This is a description of Garrick with which Boswell strongly concurs: “I take it for granted that my proposition is not denied, that a good player is indeed in a certain sense the character that he represents, during the time of his performance; and that this is truly the case, I have been assured by that great ornament of the stage [Garrick]” (OPP 14). The nature of this “transfer of soul,” however, is difficult to describe. In Boswell’s best attempt to explain this “mysterious power,” he suggests that the player “must have a kind of double feeling. He must assume in a strong degree the character which he represents, while he at the same time retains the consciousness of his own character” (OPP 18). Boswell’s “double feeling” brings us back to the analogy Mason draws to explain the nature of parliamentary representation, which can be thought of in terms of “*Consubstantiation*,—or the Bread and Wine remaining Bread and Wine, whilst the spiritual Presence is reveal’d in Parallel Fashion, so to speak,—closer to the Parliament we are familiar with here on Earth, as whatever they may *represent*, yet do they remain, dismayingly, Humans as well” (Pynchon M&D 404). Consubstantiate representation, the Reverend’s yoking together of “literal reality” and “metaphorical vehicle” so that both are present “in Parallel Fashion,” serves as a dominant trope in his narrative.

Consubstantiate representation allows the Reverend to fuse the authentic with the nonauthentic and to establish his conditional authority, recalling Patterson’s explanation: “Representation becomes the critical middle term between the absolutes of authority and autonomy” (xxi). The conditionality of the Reverend’s authority and his insistence on subverting the authenticity of his history are similar to the narrator’s subversion of his authority through self-parody in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. The Reverend, however, is not

content to leave his history as relatively authentic because to do so leaves it open to the challenges discussed earlier; he wants the voices he has recorded to be heard and believed. Instead, he opposes the legal standards of authority typical of conventional history with the authority of his performance. If, as Boswell argues, a player can become the role he portrays, then by an extension of the same principle the Reverend's story can become the reality it represents, though this assertion should be qualified by "in a certain sense," just as Boswell qualifies his assertion. More than just a model of the historical past, the Reverend's narrative is a re-presentation of the events, and in this sense it becomes a "life-line back into a Past we risk, each day, losing our forebears in forever." "A" past, not "the" past: the Reverend's narrative is only a version, but insofar as it is an authentic version, it becomes the events it represents.

The cliché "living history" does not do justice to the Reverend's attempt, like Herodotus reading his *Histories* before the Athenian public, to bring Mason and Dixon to life for his family. However, the idea of bringing the past to life is appropriate insofar as it suggests that Mason's metaphor of consubstantiation works in the opposite direction as well: while the Reverend's narrative is full of representations that "whatever they may *represent*" remain what they literally are, it also contains representations that, whatever they may actually *be*, become what they represent. Such a possibility is hinted at early in the novel when the Reverend demonstrates the Transit of Venus on the LeSparks' orrery, to which the newly discovered planet soon to be called Uranus had been added the previous spring. In adding these new planets to each of the orreries he had constructed in the colonies, the orrery builder grows more and more elaborate until he arrives in Philadelphia and "appl[ies] to the miniature greenish-blue globes *Mappemondes* of some

intricacy, as if there were being reveal'd to him, one Orrery at a time, a World with a History even longer than our own, a recognizable Creator, Oceans that had to be cross'd, lands that had to be fought over, other Species to be conquer'd" (Pynchon M&D 95). The children gaze at this miniature possible world as they also do the mahogany card table in the same room, using magnifying lenses like the telescopes that discovered the original; in addition, like the Brontë children's tales of Gondal and Angria, "They have imagin'd and partly compos'd a book, *History of the New Planet*, the Twins providing the Wars, and Brae the scientifick Inventions and Useful Crafts" (Pynchon M&D 95). The planet on the orrery becomes what it represents in the children's book, which, like the Reverend's narrative, is the history of a possible world and thus remains a subjunctive reality.

The novel provides several other cases of models that go even further in their "fail[ure] to mark the Boundaries between Reality and Representation" (Pynchon M&D 429). The primary example is that of the Duck, as discussed in the previous chapter. These representations, "passing some Critickal Value" in terms of their complexity and "Attention to Detail," go so far as to make the inanimate animate. The urge "toward making all authentic" that infuses the Duck with life corresponds to the encyclopedic style of the Reverend's "Herodotic Web of Adventures and Curiosities" and Pynchon's work in general (M&D 7). Pynchon's encyclopedic style not only generates the authority of the narrator but also creates in the narrative the level of complexity and detail that Chef Allègre suspects enables the Duck's metamorphosis.

Perhaps the most telling difference between the *Gravity's Rainbow* narrator and the Reverend lies in their contrasting attitudes with regard to the reader. Whereas the

narrator of *Gravity's Rainbow* constantly asserts his control and uses encyclopedism to establish his mastery over the reader, the Reverend cultivates the reader's confidence. Authentication authority becomes a moot issue in *Gravity's Rainbow* when on the final page it all turns out to have been a movie anyway; in *Mason & Dixon*, on the other hand, the final scene in the framing narrative insists that it all really happened. The Reverend constructs a contingent authority and subverts the notion of a fully authenticated historical narrative, claiming only relative authentication, but at the same time consistently acting as though his version of events is unassailable. Thus, the reader is matter-of-factly introduced to an extremely animated mechanical Duck—an invisible one, at that. By fusing non-authentic and authentic in the middle ground of his representations, the Reverend also fuses his history with the present day, framed narrative with framing, animate with inanimate, visible with invisible, Mobility with nobility.

Despite the Duck's powers, which grow more and more incredible through the second part of the novel, this is a great deal of symbolic weight to carry. The Duck, after all, is not to be taken seriously; it is not "real." This is true: the Duck is funny; however, it is not merely comic relief. Furthermore, the Reverend's insistence on the authenticity of the Duck, as well as other fantastic elements of his story, is pivotal. In cultivating the reader's confidence in these doubtful elements, the Reverend plays the role of historian as confidence man. It is fitting, then, that Vaucanson's Duck, historically, was less than miraculous. Though Richard Altick describes Vaucanson as a distinguished scientist, he also cites a debunking of the Duck by "the great nineteenth-century French conjuror Robert-Houdin, who makes it [the Duck's process of digestion] sound embarrassingly simple" (Altick 65).¹³ After the seeds the Duck had picked up and "eaten" were

deposited into a box inside the Duck, Robert-Houdin explains, “Bread-crumbs, colored green, was expelled by a forcing pump, and carefully caught on a silver salver as the result of artificial digestion. This was handed round to be admired, while the ingenious trickster laughed in his sleeve at the credulity of the public” (qtd. in Altick 65). Ives repeatedly attempts the same kind of exposé with regard to the Reverend’s narrative; my point, however, is not that the Duck in the Reverend’s telling is, like Vaucanson’s actual Duck, inauthentic but that the conditional authority on which it is based ultimately depends on neither the quality of the Reverend’s representations nor the success of his performance nor even the encyclopedism of his descriptions. These all contribute a great deal, of course, but the final determination is a matter of the reader’s confidence or, more appropriately, the reader’s faith. In his discussion of how novelists find the authority with which to begin, Edward Said contends that “no novelist has ever been unaware that his authority, regardless of how complete, or the authority of a narrator, is a sham” (84). The Reverend’s self-consciousness of his position as confidence man is most evident in the very confidence with which he tells his tale.

The Reverend opposes the absolute authority assumed by a history based on legal standards and in doing so recognizes that while he can give his story relative authentication, it can only be fully authenticated by his listeners and readers. The confidence he is looking for is not that of the gull or sucker but that of the believer. In describing the singing of several Sisters of the Widows of Christ, the Reverend explains to his listeners in an aside, “Tho’ I was not present in the usual sense, nevertheless, I am a clergyman,—be confident, ’twas an utterly original *moment musicale*, as they say in France” (Pynchon M&D 519). His story, the Reverend suggests, can be believed in; this

is the point of his cultivation of authority, and it is through belief that his narrative is authenticated. With each doubtful element his listeners and readers accept, they take another step forward in their belief:

Doubt is of the essence of Christ. [. . .] The final pure Christ is pure uncertainty. He is become the central subjunctive fact of a Faith, that risks ev'rything upon one bodily Resurrection. . . . Wouldn't something less doubttable have done? a prophetic dream, a communication with a dead person? Some few tatters of evidence to wrap our poor naked spirits against the coldness of a World where Mortality and its Agents may bully their way, wherever they wish to go. . . . (Pynchon M&D 511)

Subjunctive facts are also what make up possible worlds such as the one the Reverend constructs. The Reverend's performance as narrator has as its goal promoting belief in this doubtful though possible world; his audience's belief supplies the "mysterious power" Boswell attempts to describe. In the Reverend's narrative, the metaphors for understanding this power are drawn primarily from the science of astronomy. He looks to astronomy not for an objective perspective but for a confirmation of the limitations of any given perspective; astronomy provides the space within which the authentic and non-authentic can be fused and where possible worlds can, in fact, become real.

Endnotes

1. Doležel, Ruth Ronen, and Marie-Laure Ryan trace possible worlds theory back to its origins in the philosophy of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz; after a long dormancy, the concept was re-introduced and popularized by modal logicians such as Saul Kripke and David Lewis in the 1960s and '70s. On the history of possible worlds theory and its incorporation into literary criticism, see Doležel (H 12-24 and PWLF 240-242), Ronen (1-75), and Ryan (PWAINT 1-30 and PWRLT 528-536). For a cross-disciplinary introduction to the concept of possible worlds, see Sture Allén.
2. Doležel defines “fictional fact” as “An authenticated possible entity; an entity that exists fictionally” (H 280).
3. Doležel prefers “*Er*-form” and “*Ich*-form” to third-person and first-person.
4. In what is a humorous bit of understatement when applied to postmodern encyclopedic narratives, Doležel adds, “Necessarily, this narrative [the first-person mode] challenges the reader to a more participatory role in the reconstruction of the fictional world” (H 154).
5. As is often the case in the primary narrative of *Mason & Dixon*, much of the dialogue in this scene is left untagged, so definitively identifying the speakers is problematic. In the limited amount of criticism now available on *Mason & Dixon*, the family’s argument over history and novels and the epigraph which precedes it have become critical touchstones, as they should be. The epigraph in particular provides the clearest and most succinct summation of the Reverend’s philosophy of history. However, while the scene’s importance is clear, the identity of at least one of the speakers is less obvious than it may at first seem. The narrator identifies one of the speakers as Ives but leaves the identities

of the other speakers unspecified. David Cowart unequivocally states that Ives is arguing with the Reverend, assuming that since the views expressed in response to Ives resemble those of the epigraph, the character voicing them must be the same. The Reverend, Cowart argues, “speaks here for the metahistorical perspective, as his listeners articulate the commonsense objections. . . . Wicks, like Aristotle, values history only insofar as it allies itself to the insights of poetry or, more broadly, of literature. ‘Who claims Truth, Truth abandons’ (350), he declares, articulating a kind of parallax view of history” (358). Referring to the same speech, Mark Siegel less confidently writes, “The lawyer in Cherrycoke’s audience responds forcibly to this attitude in his own son,” presumably meaning Ethelmer, though “his own son” could also be DePugh (445). Since Ives’s growing frustration in this scene is directed at Ethelmer, not the Reverend, and Ives identifies Ethelmer as the speaker who criticizes his support of “a single Version [. . .] proceeding from a single Authority,” it seems clear that Cowart has been misled by the similarity of sentiment between the Reverend’s epigraph and Ethelmer’s dialogue. While the two characters have similar views, the Reverend fears that Ethelmer’s cynicism is “a step past Deism, a purpos’d Disconnection from Christ. . . .” (Pynchon M&D 264).

6. The model for this authority “is precisely the divine world-creating word” (Doležel H 149).

7. Doležel tends to overstate White’s thesis in his characterization of the threat posed by the “postmodernist challenge to the integrity of history.” Doležel assumes, as do many of White’s critics, that White equates history with fiction entirely; in fact, Doležel goes even further when he implies that White makes this argument almost underhandedly. Doležel argues that in *Tropics of Discourse* White

repeats that explanation in history is a matching of “a specific plot structure with the set of historical events that he [the historian] wishes to endow with a meaning of a particular kind.” But then comes the surprising non sequitur: “This is essentially a literary, *that is to say* fiction-making, operation” (1978 [TD], 85; emphasis added). The double equation “plot structuring=literary operation=fiction-making” is arrived at not by analysis, but by a substitution of synonyms, or at least terms that White considers to be synonymous. The equating of history and fiction is smuggled into the postmodernist paradigm by a tautology. (FHN 251)

Doležel omits the sentence that follows in the original: “And to call it that in no way detracts from the status of historical narratives as providing a kind of knowledge” (White TD 85). Earlier in *Tropics of Discourse*, White is even clearer about the separation of history and fiction: “I have never denied that knowledge of history, culture, and society was possible; I have only denied that a scientific knowledge, of the sort actually attained in the study of physical nature, was possible” (White 23). Doležel’s characterization of White’s supposed attempt to equate history with fiction weakens his own argument: if one innocuous little sentence—a tautological one at that—is all that it takes to threaten the “integrity of history,” then the line between the two could never have been too well established to begin with. Despite Doležel’s contentions, White consistently maintains a distinction between history and fiction, while basing his study of history on the shared tools and techniques of history and fiction-making, similarities which had been largely ignored prior to his *Metahistory*.

8. Doležel supports this reading of *Maus* but considers it irrelevant: “We might question the tastefulness of such a representation, but we have to agree with White that it is not ‘conventional history.’ . . . Spiegelman’s comics are no ‘historical narrative’ and therefore have no bearing on White’s argument” (FHN 270).
9. Wary of falling into the same mistake I have accused Cowart of above, I will refrain from offering a definitive identification of the speaker who tells the Reverend to “Make something up, then—Munchausen would.” The context strongly suggests that it is either Ives or Ethelmer without making it clear which. If Ives is the speaker, this further demonstrates that he has succumbed to the power of the Reverend’s narrative. Another possible reading would attribute “Make something up, then—Munchausen would” not to a smug and skeptical Ives but to Ethelmer, who has previously expressed his admiration for Munchausen’s fabulous history and may be asking for more of the same here. Following this, the Reverend patronizingly affords Ives the opportunity to enter the fray. More importantly, in both readings, the Reverend’s direct question to Ives mocks the latter’s inconsistency in applying legal standards of authority.
10. Later, more awake and energetic in anticipation of his “Midnight Junto,” Ives does rally for one last skeptical objection when the Reverend suggests Mason may have run into Samuel Johnson and James Boswell when they were all three headed north into Scotland: “‘More likely,’ snorts Ives, ‘they didn’t pass within a hundred miles of Mason’” (Pynchon M&D 759, 744).
11. Technically, since this occurs at the hypodiegetic level, the Reverend is telling a hypo-hypodiegetic narrative as though it were a hypodiegetic narrative, making it

pseudo-hypodiegetic. Somewhat less awkwardly, the Reverend is telling a tertiary narrative as though it were part of the secondary narrative level.

12. The diegetic level of chapter two, the novel's briefest, is ambiguous because the third-person narration linking the two letters could be either the outer frame narrator or the Reverend, employing the subjectivized-*Er* form that soon becomes his default mode. The latter seems more likely; since the outer frame narrator does not narrate events involving Mason and Dixon elsewhere in the novel, the same is likely true here. Even so, it remains unclear whether the Reverend is reading these letters aloud to his audience, whether they are provided as background for the reader, or how exactly they fit into the hypodiegetic narrative. The Reverend's later statement that he has "not found any of Mason's Letters, tho' there are said to be many about" further complicates the chapter's status: has someone other than the Reverend provided this letter? Is the Reverend reconstructing the letter based on Mason's account of it in the same manner as the following chapter but without identifying it as a reconstruction (and in contrast to his later speculation regarding a letter Mason could not have told him about)? Or is this chapter merely a kind of preview of the next?

13. Altick's *The Shows of London* is likely among the sources Pynchon consulted for information on Vaucanson and his mechanical Duck. Chef Allègre refers to Vaucanson as "The Man Voltaire call'd a Prometheus" (Pynchon M&D 372); Altick quotes several lines from Voltaire, including, "Le hardi Vaucanson, rival de Prométhée" (64).

Chapter 5

Singular Points and Authenticity

The poet, the painter, the sculptor, the musician, the architect seek each to concentrate this radiance of the world on one point . . .

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

In the following discussion I will employ several similar terms to describe a set of related devices used to figure events as authentic by a diverse group of writers. One term that will be particularly prominent is “singular point.” A useful starting point for understanding my use of this term is Ralph Waldo Emerson’s well-known description of the “transparent eye-ball” (N 10; ch. 1). Emerson employs the phrase in explaining his moment of transcendence: “Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God” (N 10; ch. 1). Emerson’s image of the transparent eye-ball marks a point of contact between the individual, microcosmic mind and the macrocosmic spirit of which it is paradoxically both part and mirror image. Further contributing to the paradox of this point of contact is that it simultaneously represents both local discontinuity and global continuity. While Emerson feels part of the larger spiritual whole, he is disconnected from his immediate surroundings: “The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental” (N 10; ch. 1). The singular

points I will be discussing similarly mark moments of contact between inner and outer frames of reference. Likewise, they simultaneously signal discontinuity and continuity, though greater emphasis is placed on discontinuity.

By examining the different roles singular points play for William Wordsworth, James Clerk Maxwell, and Friedrich Nietzsche, I will establish a context for reading the significance of singular points in postmodern encyclopedic novels. As the picture of singular points painted by these different thinkers evolves, one significant quality becomes clear. More than just marking a point of contact between microcosm and macrocosm, as they do for Emerson, singular points signify a breakdown of such frames altogether. Singular points come to represent a fusion or, to use the term Pynchon employs in *Mason & Dixon*, a lamination of inner microcosm and outer macrocosm into a single seamless surface. The significance of this fusion or lamination remains the same as it was for Emerson: to create a locus or source of authenticity. For Emerson, the authenticity associated with singular points manifests as a loss of self as the self becomes one with the larger whole or spirit of which it is “part or particle.” For Maxwell and Nietzsche, authenticity manifests as a moment that is undetermined with respect to empirical science for Maxwell and history for Nietzsche. Rather than the self becoming discontinuous from local surroundings, the discontinuity is located in either a physical point of infinitesimal magnitude or a moment of history. The authenticity associated with the epiphany or moment of transcendence in Emerson and Wordsworth evolves into a moment of radical transformative possibilities in Maxwell and Nietzsche and finally into a moment of apocalyptic potential in postmodern encyclopedic novels. Singular points themselves develop from moments of contact with spirit that occur in nature and/or the

soul as seen in Emerson and Wordsworth to the opposite extreme of being associated almost solely with technology in the novels of Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and other postmodern encyclopedists.

Closely related to the singular point is the “singularity.” In postmodern encyclopedic novels, singular points are consistently used as framing devices at the beginnings and conclusions of the novels. The framed events constitute a singularity. By using singular points as framing devices, postmodern writers contribute further to their paradoxical nature. Singular points signify a breakdown of frames, yet they are consistently and ostentatiously incorporated into the beginnings and conclusions of postmodern encyclopedic novels. In a sense, they frame the novels as unframed. The goal in doing so is to endow all the events of the novel with the authenticity that characterizes the evanescent singular point. The *Zone of Gravity’s Rainbow* is the primary example of singularity as I will be employing the term. Other examples include Gabriel García Márquez’s Macondo in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Salman Rushdie’s India in *Midnight’s Children*, and Don DeLillo’s depiction of Cold War America in *Underworld*. Each of these regions is bounded in time by singular points that construct a frame of authenticity around the events of each novel.

Singular Points

Authenticity, Lionel Trilling suggests, has “usurp[ed]” the place of sincerity “in the cultural firmament” and assumed “dominion over men’s imagination of how they ought to be” (13). Trilling acknowledges the difficulty of usefully defining a concept as expansive yet central as authenticity and thus begins his effort by way of illustration. He

points to two of Wordsworth's poems, specifically mentioning a single line from "Michael" and just over one line from *The Prelude*. The former, the observation by neighbors that Michael had often gone to work on the sheepfold he and his son had begun together "And never lifted up a single stone," captures Michael's oneness with his grief and conveys the essence of that grief directly to the reader (Wordsworth "Michael" line 466; qtd. in Trilling 86). Reading this line, Trilling argues, "we are impelled to use some word which denotes the nature of this being and which accounts for the high value we put upon it. The word we employ for this purpose is 'authenticity'" (87). In the latter reference, Wordsworth comes perhaps as close as one can to identifying the source of the authentic: "Points have we all of us within our souls / Where all stand single" (*Prel.* 3:185-6; qtd. in Trilling 96). Trilling's comment is apposite: "Wordsworth said this in 1805 and the passage of time has not, it would seem, diminished the powerful charm of these points of singleness. But how are they to be reached?" (96). The "powerful charm" of these points lies in their guarantee of authenticity; needless to say, such singular points still hold their charm today, more than thirty years after Trilling delivered the lectures collected in *Sincerity and Authenticity* and nearly two centuries after Wordsworth originally penned his lines. In fact, their appeal is nowhere more profoundly evident than in the novels of Thomas Pynchon, particularly the one he was writing at the time of Trilling's lectures. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon explores, both satirically and seriously, if only rarely sincerely, the very question Trilling raises—"how are they to be reached?"—as well as others: what does it mean to reach a singular point? what, paradoxically, do singular points have in common? and most importantly, "Do all these points imply, like the Rocket's, an annihilation?" (Pynchon GR 396).

Though the observations Trilling makes in his consideration of Wordsworth are relevant, Pynchon's meditation on singular points does not originate with Wordsworth. In his discussion of the conflict between free will and determinism in *Gravity's Rainbow*, James W. Earl locates one likely source in James Clerk Maxwell's essay "Science and Free Will." Maxwell, according to Earl, introduced "the metaphor of 'singular points'" to contemporary treatments of free will, to which Sir James Jeans later added the notion of a pointsman capable of switching the points as one switches the points of a railroad track—"a metaphor, in fact, for the free will itself" (Earl 232). Earl exaggerates the importance of the pointsman when he emphasizes that it "recurs in modern discussions of free will" (232). In addition to Jeans's *Physics and Philosophy* (1943), Earl mentions only Sandor Ferenczi's *Further Contributions to the Theory and Technique of Psychoanalysis* (1926), in which Ferenczi briefly compares the will to a pointsman in contrast to the locomotive of psychic energy (405). Neither Jeans's image of the pointsman nor Maxwell's singular points are mentioned in recent anthologies focused on the issue of free will in philosophy.¹ In fact, one contributor to these anthologies reports never having "seen the term 'pointsman' in work on free will" (R. Clarke). This is not to say that free will is not at issue in *Gravity's Rainbow*; clearly it is, and singular points play a central role in Pynchon's exploration of the possibility of free will. Earl misses the opportunity, however, to place the issue in a more fruitful literary and historical context. Nevertheless, his observation that the pointsman "image is not Pynchon's invention" is helpful in placing Pynchon's use of both the pointsman and the notion of "singular points" in a larger context.

For Earl, this context begins with Maxwell, whose notion of a sorting demon theoretically capable of defying the second law of thermodynamics plays such an important role in *The Crying of Lot 49*. Earl links Maxwell's singular points and the metaphor of the pointsman to Pointsman, the Pavlovian behaviorist in *Gravity's Rainbow*, and argues that Pynchon's use of the term provides some rather obvious "clues that we should see through Pointsman's rigid determinism, and see the irony in his inability to be his own pointsman, though he tries to be everyone else's" (233). Surprisingly, while Earl convincingly identifies the Zone as "one of those Maxwellian [*sic*] singular points at which one is free" (238), he does not connect Pynchon's use of the pointsman metaphor and singular points to his treatment of mathematical singularities. In addition, though he briefly alludes to the essay on history, determinism, and free will that concludes Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, suggesting there "could hardly be a more appropriate backdrop for our discussion" (234), Earl does not explore the treatment of history in Pynchon's novel. Pynchon's approach to history is in large part a function of his combination of these various and sometimes conflicting ideas of singularity; the possibility of free will and the probability of determinism converge in the metaphorical space of Pynchon's singularities.

Maxwell explains singular points in terms that may sound familiar to those familiar with his demon:²

Every existence above a certain rank has its singular points: the higher the rank, the more of them. At these points, influences whose physical magnitude is too small to be taken account of by a finite being, may produce results of the greatest importance. All great results produced by

human endeavour depend on taking advantage of these singular states when they occur. (443)

Despite Maxwell's vagueness in his allusions to "results of the greatest importance" and "great results," it is clear that singular points represent moments of enormous possibility. Faced with the similar difficulty of defining authenticity, Trilling illustrates the concept with examples from Wordsworth; Maxwell, in an attempt to characterize the significance of singular points, turns to Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, specifically when Brutus persuades Cassius that they should intercept Octavius and Mark Antony at Philippi rather than waiting for them to arrive at Sardis: "There is a tide in the affairs of men / Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune" (JC 4.3.249-50; qtd. in Maxwell 443). Brutus' following lines, which Maxwell does not include, indicate the outcome when the possibilities inherent in singular points remain unrealized: "Omitted, all the voyage of their life / Is bound in shallows and in miseries" (JC 4.3.250-51). From Maxwell's scientific perspective, the "shallows" and "miseries" that constitute the failure to recognize the importance and make use of singular points results in the assumption that human actions are determined and the consequent belief that advances in physical science support this conclusion.

The "points of singleness" that Trilling derives from Wordsworth represent the source of authenticity in the soul; Wordsworth's Michael strikes the reader as authentic because "It is not the case with him as with Hamlet that he has 'that within which passeth show.' There is no within and without: he and his grief are one" (Trilling 87). Like Emerson's moment of transcendence in the woods, Michael's grief in the sheepfold is a moment of contact between individual and universal grief. Michael himself marks this

point of convergence while also being disconnected from his immediate surroundings as he sits in the uncompleted sheepfold, unaware and unable to continue the work.

Maxwell's singular points function similarly as sources of authenticity, though in this case as sources of physical rather than metaphysical creation or transformation.

Maxwell's singular points are best understood as potential points of origin for undetermined events. However, because of the extremely disproportionate results that they produce, they should not be conceived in terms of a straightforward cause-and-effect relationship. At a singular point, Maxwell explains, "an expenditure of work, which in certain cases may be infinitesimally small," results in catastrophic changes (443). In giving several examples of singular points that produce widespread, large-scale physical differences, Maxwell repeatedly emphasizes their diminutive physical size. These instances of infinitesimal material singular points are juxtaposed with intangible human examples to suggest both the ineffability and enormous importance of the latter: the pebble that starts an avalanche, "the little spark" that starts a forest fire, "the little word which sets the world a fighting, the little scruple which prevents a man from doing his will, the little spore which blights all the potatoes, the little gemmule which makes us philosophers or idiots" (443). These miniscule physical examples serve as emblems of the singular points "in our own nature"—like Wordsworth's "Points . . . within our souls"—which "are by their very nature isolated, and form no appreciable fraction of the continuous course of our existence" (Maxwell 444). As a result of the isolation of the singular points in our nature, Maxwell argues, human behavior appears predictable and determined (444); only if scientific authorities "are led . . . to the study of the singularities and instabilities, rather than the continuities and stabilities of things" will the popular

“prejudice in favour of determinism” be dispelled (444). The search for and discovery of singularities in scientific areas will lead to a public more disposed to recognize the analogous sites within themselves. In the end, Maxwell’s scientific project has a goal quite similar to Wordsworth’s poetic project.

For Wordsworth, singular points exist within the soul, where, like Maxwell’s, they are similarly isolated. “Far hidden from the reach of words,” singular points produce the “god-like hours” when we feel “what an empire we inherit / As natural beings in the strength of Nature” (Wordsworth *Prel.* 3:184, 191, 192-3). Here, Wordsworth describes the romantic communion with nature as a moment without inside and outside, like the one Trilling identifies in the description of Michael’s grief. The unity of being signified by this identity of inner and outer is the essence of authenticity and the defining characteristic of “points of singleness” for Wordsworth and Trilling. While of the utmost importance, the dissolution of the boundary between inner and outer also remains mysterious, particularly when it comes to the question of how such a dissolution may be brought about. Despite its mysterious origins, however, the intensification of being that results from the fusion of inner and outer is clear. Whether a location in the soul or Michael seated in his sheepfold, the effect is to make the singular point in question seem somehow more real than its surroundings. As Trilling explains, Michael’s grief seems “exceptional in its actuality” (87). The experience of “exceptional . . . actuality” marks what is usually described in romantic terms as either a moment of transcendence or an epiphany. Such a moment dissolves the boundary between the solitary, individual, microcosmic soul and the macrocosmic natural framework of which it is a part. The result is a singular point at which the inner soul is fused with the outer

universe and the two become coterminous, producing an intensification of the “actuality” of both.

Tyrone Slothrop experiences such a moment in *Gravity's Rainbow* on the day “he became a crossroad”: “Slothrop sees a very thick rainbow here, a stout rainbow cock driven down out of pubic clouds into Earth, green wet valleyed Earth, and his chest fills and he stands crying, not a thing in his head, just feeling natural. . . .” (Pynchon GR 626). Slothrop here is transparent and soon to be invisible but also very much a singular point, one of Wordsworth’s “natural beings in the strength of Nature.” He is literally a crossroad, a point of intersection, with no distinction between outside and inside. Maxwell’s empirical approach to singular points is the converse of Wordsworth’s romantic approach. Both, however, respond to the need to provide an authoritative foundation for the power they associate with singular points. Wordsworth’s foundation rests on the authority of experience, even if the exact nature of that experience cannot be explained: “Points have we all of us within our souls / Where all stand single; this I feel, and make / Breathings for incommunicable powers” (*Prel.* 3: 185-87). The authority of personal experience is further supported by the common experience all people have of nature. Maxwell’s foundation also rests on the authority of experience, but of empirically observed experience rather than intuitively felt. For Maxwell, the singular points evident in the physical world authenticate the existence of analogous points of infinitesimal “physical magnitude” in the human mind, a rather elaborate means of arguing in favor of the existence of a soul with free will without using such unscientific terminology.

Singular Points and History

To this array of singular points oriented in the plane of the individual, Steven Weisenburger briefly refers to another in the plane of history. With reference to the Schwarzkommando, Weisenburger suggests that the Schwarzkommando's construction of Rocket 00001 "derives from their belief in a cyclical time scheme which makes it possible for them to imagine moving toward what Nietzsche refers to in *The Use and Abuse of History* as a 'singular point' outside the stream of time" (EH 153); though he does not make this connection, Weisenburger's comment is even more applicable to Slothrop's eventual dissolution following his vision of the rainbow. After he mentions the possible relevance of Nietzsche's approach to history, Weisenburger immediately dismisses this connection; *Gravity's Rainbow*, he argues, follows contemporary physics in its rejection of "cyclical notions of Time's movements" (EH 154). Slothrop escapes the forces seeking to control him, but in what "is surely the strongest judgment against him," he is unable to do so with his "memory, vitality, and humanity still in place" (Weisenburger EH 154). Weisenburger is too dismissive in his harsh judgment of Slothrop's disappearance. While a loss of memory accompanies his loss of "personal density" (GR 509), he is certainly never more vital than when he sees the rainbow. Furthermore, Nietzsche's philosophy of history encompasses more than merely viewing time as cyclical in nature; this view is of particularly little importance to *The Use and Abuse of History*, a work that is concerned primarily with the role history should play in one's life and secondarily with the type of education that could inculcate the proper relationship to history. In fact, Nietzsche's approach to history sheds further light on both Slothrop's disappearance and the nature of singular points.

Nietzsche locates freedom in the ability to escape what he calls the “*malady of history*” (69; sec. 10); his description of the effects of this affliction identify it as a loss of the authenticity Wordsworth is able to feel in singular points, the same authenticity that Slothrop experiences when he witnesses the rainbow. For Nietzsche, this authenticity is lost when the weight of history becomes overwhelming and destroys one’s unity of being: “We crumble and fall asunder, our whole being is divided, half mechanically, into an inner and outer side . . . we suffer from the malady of words, and have no trust in any feeling that is not stamped with its special word” (68-69; sec. 10). The effect of an “excess of history” (Nietzsche 69; sec 10) directly contrasts the effect of the singular points observed in Wordsworth and Pynchon. For Nietzsche, the weight of history reverses the process of going beyond “the reach of words” and the resulting breakdown in the distinction between inside and outside. The “excess of history” destroys the unity of being seen earlier in the powerfully authentic example of Wordsworth’s Michael. Even for Michael, however, this unity is only possible as the result of overwhelming grief and thus proves debilitating. Michael is his grief; therefore, he has no chance of forgetting or overcoming his grief.

As a remedy for the malady of history, Nietzsche prescribes the cultivation of the unhistorical and superhistorical perspectives. An unhistorical perspective requires the capability “of *forgetting* and of drawing a limited horizon round oneself” (Nietzsche 69; sec. 10), thus arbitrarily ignoring history in order to preserve the freedom of the present and gain “the courage to begin” (Nietzsche 8; sec 1). The superhistorical perspective enables the shift of one’s vision from “the process of becoming to that which gives existence an eternal and stable character—to art and religion” (Nietzsche 69; sec. 10).

The first of these, the ability to live and feel unhistorically, is the key to experiencing time as a singular point and thus seeing oneself authentically. The person who cannot do this “loses himself in the stream of becoming” and is incapable of happiness: “One who cannot leave himself behind on the threshold of the moment and forget the past, who cannot stand on a single point, like a goddess of victory, without fear or giddiness, will never know what happiness is; and, worse still, will never do anything to make others happy” (Nietzsche 6; sec. 1). Nietzsche’s “single point” marks a moment in time rather than a part of the soul, but in other respects is quite similar to Wordsworth’s “Points . . . / Where all stand single,” most significantly in both writers’ association of the happiness and authenticity deriving from these points with an intensification of being that can only be compared to becoming god-like.

Singularities and Miracles

“Every great event happens,” Nietzsche insists, in an “unhistorical atmosphere” (9 sec. 1). Nietzsche’s “unhistorical atmosphere” makes clear the similarity between his and Maxwell’s singular points. The atmosphere from which one of Maxwell’s singular points emerges is likewise unhistorical in that it is undetermined; the chain of causation has been broken at the singular point. Nietzsche’s singular points are undetermined in that the past that has produced these moments has been forgotten. In each case, the resulting moment is imagined as discontinuous: unconnected with the past, capable of producing radical and unpredictable changes in the future. Nietzsche’s “great event[s]” and Maxwell’s “results of the greatest importance” are secular versions of miracles, phenomena that occur spontaneously, causeless effects. C. S. Lewis explicitly rejects the

notion of an effect without cause in his *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*. He begins by defining “the word *Miracle* to mean an interference with Nature by supernatural power” (Lewis 15); consequently, “A miracle is emphatically not an event without cause or without results. Its cause is the activity of God: its results follow according to Natural law” (Lewis 73). Lewis, like Maxwell, complains that a “Naturalist” or materialist conception of the universe eliminates the possibility of free will (17). However, by “supernaturalizing” miracles, he effectively naturalizes them and thus excludes any possibility of an effect without a cause: every event must be the product of either natural causes or divine will.

Each of the writers examined to this point attempts to negotiate between these two poles of the natural and supernatural, with Wordsworth at one end of the spectrum, associating singular points with the “god-like,” and Maxwell at the other, associating them with natural causes. Wordsworth is struggling to account for the authenticity he senses; Maxwell is just as clearly struggling to find a way around determinism to authentic freedom. In between natural causes and divine will lies human will, but human will alone lacks the authoritative foundation that Maxwell and Wordsworth desire. There is also perhaps another possibility, the one that Lewis so stridently resists—that of the spontaneous event, the causeless effect. In a way, this possibility would be even more unbelievable—more miraculous—than a divinely inspired miracle and much less easily accounted for than the supernatural miracles for which Lewis has a ready explanation. Indeed, just how unbelievable the possibility of the spontaneous event seems is evident in Lewis’s unwillingness to even consider such a thing. These events might be referred to

as near-miracles, secular miracles, or non-divine miracles; Wordsworth, Nietzsche, Maxwell, and Pynchon, however, consistently describe them as single or singular points.

In their resemblance to miracles, singular points reflect their evolution from Wordsworth's points in the soul, which similarly derive their power from their resemblance to the divine. Singular points in both history and the soul, as Wordsworth, Maxwell, and Nietzsche describe them, act as authoritative sources of authenticity. The singular events traditionally described as miracles have, of course, long functioned as sources of authority and proof of authenticity. As St. Augustine explains with regard to the early Christian evangelists, "What gave power to the preachers who persuaded the world was not the eloquence of the words they uttered, but the miracles in the deeds they did" (511; bk. 22, ch. 5). Even in Augustine's day, however, people complained that miracles no longer occurred (513; bk. 22, ch. 8); in the centuries since the Enlightenment, the advances of science and technology have increasingly taken the place formerly reserved for miracles.

Singularities, Miracles, and Technology

The displacement of the miraculous by the technological has been accompanied by an increasing tendency to view scientific and technological advances primarily in terms of their destructive potential. In contrast, miracles, particularly in the Christian tradition, tend to be viewed in an almost uniformly positive light, despite examples of "Miracles of Destruction" (Lewis 161).³ The destructive capacity of technology tends to be emphasized because of the extreme disparity of magnitude between cause and effect as well as the suddenness with which the effect is produced, characteristics that

technological destruction shares with Maxwell's singular points. The paradigmatic example of this kind of technological destruction is the nuclear explosion, a grotesque incarnation of Nietzsche's "great event," which creates an "unhistorical atmosphere" not through "the power of forgetting" (6; sec. 1), but through its own material destruction of the historical landscape. In addition, a nuclear explosion is the result of a process quite similar to Maxwell's description of singular points:

the system has a quantity of potential energy, which is capable of being transformed into motion, but which cannot begin to be so transformed till the system has reached a certain configuration, to attain which requires an expenditure of work, which in certain cases may be infinitesimally small, and in general bears no definite proportion to the energy developed in consequence thereof. (443)

Maxwell acknowledges the destructive potential of such a process in his examples of the forest fire and avalanche; he could not have envisioned, however, the applicability of this model to the chain reaction that results in a nuclear explosion. In the case of nuclear bombs, the "infinitesimally small" amount of work corresponds to the firing of neutrons that begins the chain reaction; the "certain configuration" that enables transformation is a matter of mass: in a nuclear chain reaction, "if there is enough uranium so that half the neutrons produce two others, the process is self-sustaining and a 'critical mass' of uranium is said to be present" (Schelling 94).⁴

The connection between miracles and singular points of a scientific and technological nature is nowhere more evident in recent literature than in the epilogue to Don DeLillo's *Underworld*. DeLillo's fiction is typical of postmodern literature in that

the secular, technological counterpart to the miraculous has increasingly come to be identified with apocalyptic destruction in general and nuclear devastation in particular. These concerns have been prominent in DeLillo's work since his second novel, *End Zone*, in which football serves as a metaphor for nuclear war, and continue through the "Airborne Toxic Event" of *White Noise*. In the final section of *Underworld*, Nick Shay, the novel's nominal protagonist, travels to "a remote site in Kazakhstan to witness an underground nuclear explosion" sponsored by a Russian company that hopes to create a market for the nuclear annihilation of toxic waste (DeLillo U 788). After visiting a nearby clinic that treats the victims of radiation from years of Soviet nuclear tests, Nick returns to Phoenix, where his son "spends tremendous amounts of time with his computer. He visits a website devoted to miracles" and tells his father of people around the world who visit abandoned uranium mines in hopes of miraculous cures (DeLillo U 806). One of the miracles listed on the website takes the narrative back to the Bronx, where Nick grew up. After witnessing this miracle—the face of Esmeralda, a recently murdered homeless girl, appears on a billboard when the advertisement is illuminated by the headlights of passing subway trains—Sister Alma Edgar, a nun who had taught Nick in grade school, is overwhelmed and experiences the loss of self typical of an epiphanic moment of transcendence. Afterward, Sister Edgar is faced with "nothing left to do but die and this is precisely what she does" (DeLillo U 824).

DeLillo's description of the logistics of this contemporary miracle closely follows St. Augustine's account in the *City of God*. In *Underworld*, news of the miracle spreads when "the stories begin, word passing block to block, moving through churches and superettes, maybe garbled slightly, mistranslated here and there, but not deeply

distorted—it is clear enough that people are talking about the same uncanny occurrence. And some of them go and look and tell others, stirring the hope that grows when things surpass their limits” (DeLillo U 818). The initial crowd of a few people on a traffic median grows to thirty, then two hundred, one thousand, until finally the image is removed from the billboard. The growth of the crowd behavior mirrors that of Maxwell’s singular point and also displays the characteristics of a critical mass model: once enough people begin gathering to watch the billboard, the activity becomes self-sustaining and, in fact, progresses geometrically (Schelling 94-95). As a result, the narrator wonders, “How do things end, finally, things such as this—peter out to some forgotten core of weary faithful huddled in the rain?” (DeLillo U 823). In rejecting the objection that miracles no longer occur, Augustine argues that miracles are still

being wrought in the name of Christ. . . . Only, such miracles do not strike the imagination with the same flashing brilliance as the earlier miracles, and so they do not get the same flashing publicity as the others did. The fact that the canon of our Scriptures is definitively closed brings it about that the original miracles are everywhere repeated and are fixed in people’s memory, whereas contemporary miracles which happen here or there seldom become known to even the whole of the local population in and around the place where they occur. Especially is this the case in the more populous cities, where relatively few learn the facts while most of the people remain uninformed. And when the news does spread from mouth to mouth, even in the case of Christians reporting to Christians, it is

too unauthoritative to be received without some difficulty or doubt. (513; bk. 22, ch. 8)

In *Underworld*, despite the quickly growing number of people who journey to the billboard, only a few thousand see it before the orange juice advertisement is removed. Ordinarily, this would be how such things ended, lost to history, known only to a relatively few locals, like Nick Shay's father who half a century earlier had disappeared into the "underworld" one day without warning. In this case, however, Nick learns of the miracle by way of his son's web surfing; the appearance of Esmeralda's face on the billboard is listed on a website devoted to miracles. It would seem that in the new medium of cyberspace, publicity and authority are inversely proportional; to the extent that the web remedies the problem of publicity that Augustine identifies, it further compounds the problem of authority.⁵

Singular Points as Framing Devices

In placing the miracle of Esmeralda's face in the billboard immediately after Nick Shay's trip to Kazakhstan, DeLillo mirrors the events of the novel's prologue. The novel is thus dually framed by the formal devices of prologue and epilogue as well as the symmetry of miraculous and singular events that take place within them: the prologue, of course, is occasioned by the coincidence of timing that resulted in two "shots heard 'round the world" occurring on October 3, 1951—Bobby Thomson's pennant-winning home run and the second detonation of an atomic bomb by the Soviet Union; the front page of the *New York Times* reported both events the following day in mirror-image, above-the-fold stories. The epilogue describes Nick's observation of a contemporary

nuclear explosion in a republic of the former Soviet Union and the miracle of Esmeralda's face in the billboard. The final pages of the novel synthesize these opposing framing devices of miracle and technological singularity. The significance of this conclusion has not yet been fully appreciated. While Arthur Saltzman recognizes the importance of the questions it raises, the novel "ends without answering these questions" (312). Tony Tanner dismisses "*Keystroke 2*," the brief final section of the epilogue, entirely: "Sister Edgar dies 'peacefully,' and we assume happy in her recovered faith. And the book ends there (apart from a short, visionary coda)" (AM 220).

In fact, quite a bit occurs in the coda that follows Sister Edgar's death. After she dies, Sister Edgar finds herself "in cyberspace, not heaven" (DeLillo U 825). The point of view shifts to the second person, leaving Sister Edgar at the mercy of the "you" who "decide[s] on a whim to visit the H-bomb home page" (DeLillo U 825). As the computer displays the "H-bomb homepage," the narrator explains that this is the ultimate end of technology: "It all culminates here" (DeLillo U 825). The monitor shows "Every thermonuclear bomb ever tested" (DeLillo U 825). Enmeshed in this virtual apocalypse, Sister Edgar almost experiences a moment of transcendence: "The jewels roll out of her eyes and she sees God. No, wait, sorry. It is a Soviet bomb she sees, the largest yield in history" (DeLillo U 826). In cyberspace, the merging of epiphany and technological singular point appears complete. However, this is neither the victory of naturalism over supernaturalism nor a complete displacement of miracles by technological singularities. Instead, DeLillo reorients miracles and singular points from the frame of the supernatural world, with the natural world contained within it, to the virtual.

Singular points, whether regions of the soul or events in time, are characterized by discontinuity. Miracles also mark—or at least seem to mark—moments of discontinuity. Lewis’s explanation reveals the affinity between miracles and the great events that, for Nietzsche, occur only in an “unhistorical atmosphere” and as the result of forgetting: “In the forward direction (i.e. during the time which follows its occurrence) it [a miracle] is interlocked with all Nature just like any other event. Its peculiarity is that it is not in that way interlocked backwards, interlocked with the previous history of Nature” (73). Lewis’s formulation would be equally applicable to Maxwell’s singular points; however, Nietzsche and Maxwell locate the possibility of freedom in the discontinuity represented by singular points and welcome such points into their conceptions of the world. Lewis, on the other hand, needs to efface the appearance of discontinuity so as to avoid allowing inconsistency to mar his conception of a divinely ordered world. He therefore ascribes the apparent failure of miracles to interlock backwards to the limitations of human perception. Miracles do, in fact, interlock backwards; however, instead of interlocking within the Natural, they interlock with the Supernatural framework. Unity is preserved and causality maintained through recourse to God. Lewis thus posits an outer, divine framework that contains the natural world. Like Emerson’s and Wordsworth’s singular points, miracles mark a moment of contact between the outer and inner frames. Rather than allowing for the lamination of these two frames into a single surface, however, miracles reinforce the hierarchy of supernatural and natural.

The nuclear explosions that bombard Sister Edgar’s consciousness from the “H-bomb homepage” each mark a technologically produced singular point. The destruction wrought by the actual explosions has already produced literal discontinuity. DeLillo’s

narrator, however, emphasizes that these “are fusion bombs, remember, atoms forcibly combined, and even as they detonate across the screen, again and again, there is another fusion taking place” (DeLillo U 826). “Everything is connected in the end,” the narrator explains (DeLillo U 826), but in contrast to Lewis, who sees everything as ultimately connected by the supernatural framework (i.e. by God), here the connection is virtual. It occurs in cyberspace, a “location” that offers an alternative to the natural and supernatural worlds. Cyberspace thus provides a continuum in which to view the relationships between discontinuities without recourse to God, allowing space for both miracles and singular points and revealing the similarities between the two.

Can tapping into cyberspace, however, provide access to the same sense of authenticity that previous writers have derived from singular points, whether they be regions of the soul or moments in time? For anyone who has spent much time browsing the web, this proposition must seem doubtful. In fact, the absurdity of the events DeLillo includes in the epilogue seems designed to discredit their authority: the vision that appears in, of all places, an orange juice advertisement; the detonation of a nuclear weapon with the aim of incinerating the world’s most toxic waste in the hopes of turning a profit. And yet, despite their absurdity, these events have real effects on Nick Shay and Sister Edgar. DeLillo even acknowledges the lack of authority that characterizes the virtual. The synthesis of opposites that occurs in the final pages is “A fantasy in cyberspace” (U 826); even the word that appears out of the explosions on the monitor and concludes the novel is “only a sequence of pulses on a dullish screen and all it can do is make you pensive” (U 827). DeLillo portrays the loss of authority for both miracles and singularities as a search for authenticity: the question that indirectly drives the entire

massive plot is that of the authenticity of the baseball Nick Shay comes to own. Is it the miracle ball, the ball Bobby Thomson hit to win the 1951 pennant, now a sacred relic like a piece of the True Cross? If it is, the ball is a fetish that serves as physical manifestation of the nostalgic desire Russ Hodges experiences as he walks across the Polo Grounds following the game: “Russ wants to believe a thing like this keeps us safe in some undetermined way” (U 60). When the target of the desire for something authentic to believe in is a baseball game, it is clear that singularities no longer hold for DeLillo the same authority that they held for earlier writers. Cyberspace provides an alternative matrix in which to view the discontinuities marked by both miracles and singularities from a macrocosmic perspective, but DeLillo offers little indication that cyberspace can function as a foundation for authenticity. Instead, he leaves the reader with only a question that suggests cyberspace might be able to offer the same possibility previous writers have found in singular points—the possibility of a dissolution of the boundary between inside and outside: “Is cyberspace a thing within the world or is it the other way around? Which contains the other, and how can you tell for sure?” Cyberspace offers some of the mystery seen in Wordsworth’s and Maxwell’s singular points but none of the authority derived from intuitive personal experience or empirical observation, respectively.

The paradoxical question of whether the world contains cyberspace or vice versa is a culmination of the confusion of interior and exterior to which the novel as a whole contributes. In *Underworld*, like Pynchon in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, DeLillo figures this blurring through framing devices that construct the narrative version of a Möbius strip or, even more appropriately, a Klein bottle. The prologue and epilogue narrate the longest

continuous episodes; they also contain the chronologically earliest and latest events of the novel, respectively. The six parts sandwiched between them, however, begin with the chronologically penultimate scenes and proceed backwards. Thus, the earliest events of the novel, which are found in the prologue, open up into the penultimate events, while the epilogue is appended to the scenes that succeed the events of the prologue chronologically. In addition, the three short “Manx Martin” sections occur after the first, third, and fifth parts; these sections describe, in chronological order, what happens to the Thomson home run ball in the hours immediately following the events of the prologue. A list of the major divisions of the novel may help to clarify their careful arrangement:

Prologue: The Triumph of Death [Wednesday, October 3, 1951]

Part 1: Long Tall Sally: Spring—Summer 1992

Manx Martin I [Wednesday, October 3, 1951]

Part 2: Elegy for Left Hand Alone: Mid-1980s—Early 1990s

Part 3: The Cloud of Unknowing: Spring 1978

Manx Martin 2 [Late Wednesday, October 3, 1951]

Part 4: Cocksucker Blues: Summer 1974

Part 5: Better Things for Better Living Through Chemistry: Selected

Fragments Public and Private in the 1950s and 1960s

Manx Martin 3 [Early Thursday, October 4, 1951]

Part 6: Arrangement in Gray and Black: Fall 1951—Summer 1952

Epilogue: Das Kapital [Mid-1990s]

As even a glance at this outline reveals, DeLillo has organized the different sections in an elaborate, even baroque, symmetrical pattern. This layout has been noted by others, but

little has been made of it. Tanner, in imprecisely describing the “roughly reverse order” of the events sandwiched between the prologue and the epilogue, ultimately sees the non-linear structure of the novel as signifying very little (AM 207). Tanner confesses, “But—it may of course be my obtuseness—I just did not see the point of DeLillo’s randomisings [of chronology]” (AM 208). The point, quite simply, is to turn history inside-out, as indicated by DeLillo’s master metaphor of the “underworld”: the events that go on beneath the surface and in effect inside history are brought to the surface so that foreground (world-historical events such as the atomic test carried out by the Soviet Union and, ironically, the Giants-Dodgers playoff game) and background (Cotter Martin’s experiences at the game, the victims of radiation from the Soviet tests) are joined in a single, seamless surface or singularity. However, just as a klein bottle is capable of containing liquids, this single seamless surface is capable of holding contents as well. The surface formed by the novel is bounded by the singular points of the epilogue and prologue. These singular points construct a frame of authenticity around the events of the novel, which is to say that they frame the events as unframed. The result is similar to the effect of the videotape of the Texas Highway Killer as “you” view it in the novel:

There’s something about the nature of the tape, the grain of the image, the sputtering black-and-white tones, the starkness—you think this is more real, truer-to-life than anything around you. The things around you have a rehearsed and layered and cosmetic look. The tape is superreal, or maybe underreal is the way you want to put it. It is what lies at the scraped

bottom of all the layers you have added. And this is another reason why you keep on looking. The tape has a searing realness. (DeLillo U 157)

The singularity constructed by framing singular points, rather than stripping away levels of reality, fuses them into a single layer in order to achieve the same effect of “searing realness” or authenticity. The flat tone that characterizes nearly all of DeLillo’s writing is here at its most deadpan, making it nearly impossible to determine just how ironically the description of the videotape’s authenticity should be taken. The likelihood that the description is ironic seems inescapable. The irony does not subvert the authenticity of this particular experience, however, or at least this is not all that it subverts. If the viewing of the videotape by “you” is a mock epiphany, an experience of an Emersonian or Wordsworthian epiphany would be no less mocked in DeLillo’s novel. These experiences are completely alien to the world DeLillo constructs in *Underworld*. More than simply subverting the authenticity of any particular experience, the target of the irony is authenticity itself.

Technological Singular Points

Though much longer than the scenes that frame *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the episodes that begin and conclude *Underworld* are similarly centered around scenes of apocalypse; in each instance the potential source of apocalypse is either directly or indirectly associated with nuclear weapons technology. In the epilogue to *Underworld* and “Descent,” the final section of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, apocalypse is directly associated with nuclear weapons. In the prologue to *Underworld* and the opening dream of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the association is strongly implied. The beginning of *Underworld* is a revised

version of DeLillo's story "Pafko at the Wall," which has been given a new title, "The Triumph of Death." The new title comes from the painting by Pieter Bruegel; a reproduction of the painting from *Life* magazine falls into J. Edgar Hoover's hands in the celebration that follows the home run. In his article on "Pafko at the Wall," John N. Duvall points out that the celebration on the field in front of him, Bruegel's painting, and the image of nuclear destruction all converge in Hoover's mind ("Baseball" 294). Having been informed of the Soviet test during the game, the painting "become[s] in his [Hoover's] mind a figuration of nuclear apocalypse: 'death everywhere, conflagration in many places, it suggests blast heat and firestorm, let's face it, let's own up to it, the panoramic death of airburst and radiation'" (Duvall "Baseball" 294).⁶ The sentence Duvall quotes has been revised in *Underworld*, but the connections between post-game celebration, Bruegel painting, and nuclear apocalypse remain clear; the description has been made even more specific so as to link the events of the prologue to Nick Shay's visit to the same location in Kazakhstan in the epilogue:

Death elsewhere, Conflagration in many places, Terror universal, the crows, the ravens in silent glide, the raven perched on the white nag's rump, black and white forever, and he [Hoover] thinks of a lonely tower standing on the Kazakh Test Site, the tower armed with the bomb, and he can almost hear the wind blowing across the Central Asian steppes, out where the enemy lives in long coats and fur caps, speaking that old weighted language of theirs, liturgical and grave. What secret history are they writing? (DeLillo U 50)

The irony of DeLillo's juxtaposition of baseball game, painting, and nuclear explosion in the prologue and nuclear explosion, radiation clinic, and billboard-miracle in the epilogue effectively subverts the possibility of any of these modern examples of miracles and singular points functioning as sources of authenticity. However, while DeLillo criticizes the ability of both singular points and miracles to function as sources of authenticity in the episodes that bookend the novel, he also implicitly recognizes the fascination such events inspire, further justifying Trilling's observation that "the passage of time has not, it would seem, diminished the powerful charm of these points of singleness." It is with this observation that any discussion of the role of singularities in Pynchon's fiction in particular and postmodern encyclopedic novels in general must begin. The various conceptions of singular points touched upon here are not intended to cohere into a single, final ideal of singularity; instead, they are meant to complement one another and form a conceptual constellation against which to read Pynchon's treatment of singularities.

Before looking at Pynchon in depth, however, it is worth noticing that the prominent role of singularities in *Gravity's Rainbow* is symptomatic of a larger trend in postmodern novels. In fact, the plot shaped like a Klein bottle and framed at each end by singular points is a theme upon which several of the major works of postmodernism play variations. A plot is shaped like a Klein bottle when framing devices and shifts between diegetic levels emphatically suggest that the boundary between inner and outer has been erased. These framing devices can be either formal (for instance, DeLillo's use of prologue and epilogue in *Underworld*) or thematic (the miracles and atomic explosions in *Underworld*) or often a combination of both. The paradigmatic instance of this pattern is actually found not in a postmodern novel but in the Bible. The progression from Genesis

to Apocalypse, miracle of creation to miracle of destruction, results in a merging of the supernatural and natural frames; this progression takes a different form in postmodern fiction. The miracles of creation and destruction that frame the biblical narrative and isolate the natural frame within the supernatural are replaced by singular points, moments that offer the possibility of discontinuity. These singular points are often described as miraculous, are sometimes specifically labeled as “miracles,” and can also be ironically juxtaposed with miracles of a traditional nature, as in the epilogue to *Underworld*. At the beginnings of novels, they function as arbitrary starting points, Nietzschean singular points that mark a forgetting of prior history and provide both the authority and “the courage to begin.” The singular points with which these novels begin are often apocalyptic, as in *Underworld* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*; the concluding singular points are consistently apocalyptic. They also tend to be of a technological nature: nuclear explosions supply the prototypical example of a technological singular point; other disasters and catastrophes often suggest nuclear apocalypse, as in the apocalyptic whirlwind that ends *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Brian McHale mentions the idea of a “‘Klein-bottle’ structure” in relation to Alain Robbe-Grillet’s *Dans le labyrinthe* and *La Maison de rendez-vous* (PF 14); his brief description of their relevant structural devices is consistent with what he later calls “Strange Loops” and metalepsis, following the terminology of Douglas Hofstadter and Gerard G enette, respectively.⁷ As Hofstadter explains, a Strange Loop “occurs whenever, by moving upwards (or downwards) through the levels of some hierarchical system, we unexpectedly find ourselves right back where we started” (qtd. in McHale PF 119). McHale’s definition of a Klein bottle as a “three-dimensional figure whose inside

surface is indistinguishable from its outside” is somewhat misleading, however (McHale PF 14). In fact, Klein bottles have only one side and thus have no inside and outside; nonetheless they are capable of holding contents. The novels I am describing as narrative versions of Klein bottles are less brazenly metafictional than the ones McHale identifies.⁷ Nonetheless, they employ some of the devices McHale associates with postmodern fiction, such as metalepsis, *mise-en-abyme*, and *trompe-l'œil*, and one result is that, despite the framing singularities, “the fiction’s ontological ‘horizon’ is effectively lost” (McHale PF 114). Blurring ontological horizons allows writers to imply the question DeLillo makes explicit: “Which contains the other, and how can you tell for sure?”

This blurring of ontological boundaries, however, is not an end in itself, as it is in McHale’s account of postmodern literature in general (the foregrounding and blurring of ontological boundaries is the defining characteristic of postmodern literature for McHale). The end is the figurative representation of authenticity; in addition, it is a reaction against the “malady of history” Nietzsche describes by which “our whole being is divided, half mechanically, into an inner side and an outer side.” Reversing this process means to restore unity and authenticity. In *Underworld*, DeLillo’s narrative simultaneously moves from past to present and from present to past, with singular points demarcating each end so that within them the distinction between the two is ambiguous. The singular points at each end serve as moments of discontinuity—like Maxwell’s and Nietzsche’s singular points—that on the one hand sever the intervening events from the history before and after them and on the other hand fuse those intervening events into a single surface. The events of the various underworlds and of visible history are brought to the same level. In the epilogue, past and present are fused in the ontological shift to

cyberspace: all the H-bombs ever exploded are present at once; the two opposing Edgars, Sister Alma Edgar and J. Edgar Hoover, are united. Furthermore, the figuration of authenticity that this fusion of opposites into a single point represents is fundamentally encyclopedic in nature.

My treatment of Klein bottle structures is not meant as a formal definition, but rather as a suggestive image: these novels imply such a structure through the blurring of inside and outside, continuity and discontinuity; they do so by incorporating framing devices that deconstruct themselves, revealing the frame and its contents to be coterminous. In addition to *Underworld* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, some of the definitively postmodern novels that play variations on this theme include *Invisible Man*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and *Midnight's Children*; in addition to being postmodern, each is also encyclopedic. Each of these novels is significantly bounded by singular points; these boundary events also tend to be reduced to singular points in space that function as synecdoches for the fictional world at large. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, for instance, ends in the room in which it is always Monday and always March, where the gypsy Melquíades writes his manuscript and where Aureliano Babilonia has boarded himself in so that he can read the manuscript. Standing in the dark of this room because “he did not have the calmness to bring them out into the light,” Aureliano reads the parchments as though “under the dazzling splendor of high noon” (García Márquez 381). Ellison’s *Invisible Man* tells his story from his “hole in the basement” which he has illuminated with “exactly 1,369 lights” (7). *Gravity's Rainbow* culminates in the darkened movie theater of the final section as the light from the projector slowly fades. In each case, spatial singularity is focused even further. These microcosmic singular

points each contain *en abyme* the texts (or doubles of the text) that construct the fictional macrocosms the novels represent: Melquíades' parchments; the voice of Ellison's narrator, speaking for himself as well as for the reader; the film we have all been watching; the pickle jars Saleem Sinai has filled, one for each chapter, one for each year of his life.

Singular Framing Devices and Encyclopedic Narrative

The fusion of inside and outside caused by enclosing these novels within framing singular points is encyclopedic in several respects. The first encyclopedic quality is related to the way in which the singular points that frame the action are typically reduced to a confined, microcosmic space that serves as a synecdoche for the fictional world in question, as just discussed. Similarly, the events between these singular points function as a synecdoche for what Pynchon terms "everything in the Creation" (GR 703). The progression of events from one singular point to another follows the Biblical pattern of events from Genesis to Apocalypse or the analogous scientific version of this trajectory, from Big Bang to Big Crunch. Molly Hite provides an apt phrase for the strategy used in each of the postmodern encyclopedic novels in question when she describes Pynchon's frequent use of catalogues as "synecdoche with a vengeance" (136). More than just the use of catalogues, the entire strategy behind the encyclopedic style is one of aggressive integration. Hayden White's description of the four dominant tropes in historical writing is relevant with regard to these historical novels; White identifies synecdoche as an essentially integrative trope that foregrounds a relationship of "microcosm-macrocosm" between the events related and the historical reality of which they are a part (M 35).

Thus, while singular points mark points of discontinuity, they frame the intervening events as microcosmic histories of the world. These intervening events constitute a singularity and are characterized by the same paradoxical combination of local discontinuity and global continuity that characterized the earliest singular points discussed in Emerson and Wordsworth. This synecdochic method of representation is typical of the paradox that Hilary Clark identifies at the heart of “the encyclopaedic enterprise”: “in its drive to include the totality of things known, the encyclopaedia may nonetheless go through . . . a process betraying the actual impossibility of totalization” (FE 53). By tracing a historical arc from creation to destruction, encyclopedic novels suggest their own all-inclusiveness while at the same time using ostentatious singular events (nuclear explosions, for instance) as arbitrary beginning and ending points, thus emphasizing the impossibility of actually including everything.

The “synecdoche with a vengeance” briefly described here is not, to be sure, a device found solely in postmodern fiction. Joyce engages in a similar representation of Dublin and Bloom’s life in *Ulysses*; the day that the novel spans can also be read as a synecdoche for the historical continuum of which it is part. However, June 16 is not bounded by moments that emphatically foreground the day’s discontinuity from past and future, nor is it set up as a moment that determines the course of history: quite the opposite. It is a day like any other, emphasizing its continuity with past and future. In the American literature that precedes Pynchon and DeLillo, similar techniques can be traced back through Faulkner’s style, discussed in chapter one, which attempts to “crowd and cram everything, all experience, into each paragraph, to get the whole complete nuance of the moment’s experience, of all the recaptured light rays, into each paragraph”;

John Dos Passos's collage-construction in *U.S.A.*; Walt Whitman's democratic style, which similarly relies on expansive catalogues; as well as Emerson's conception of the work of art as an attempt "to concentrate this radiance of the world on one point" (N 17; ch. 3). What has been added in the postmodern encyclopedic novel is the use of singular points as boundary moments that create a frame of authenticity containing a microcosmic world that moves from creation to destruction.

As described earlier, this microcosmic world is further reduced to the confined locations of the singular points that begin and conclude these novels. These rooms typically contain the type of *mise en abyme* that Lucien Dällenbach classifies as an "aporetic [or paradoxical] duplication . . . that is supposed to enclose the work that encloses it" (35). The inclusion of a paradoxical duplication of the novel itself is one manifestation of the fusion of inside and outside into the single continuous surface that signifies authenticity. The effect of the *mise en abyme* at the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, or *Underworld* is to suggest the continuity of text and fictional reality, representation and represented. This paradoxical duplication suggests the second way in which the use of singular points as framing devices acts in concert with the encyclopedic style of these novels. The presence of the paradoxical *mise en abyme* within the novel suggests the possibility of moving in the opposite direction: perhaps the novel itself may be another such *mise en abyme*, one that contains and constructs the actual world of which it is a part. As DeLillo asks, "Which contains the other, and how can you tell for sure?" Despite the logical impossibility that is implied, the urge toward totalization that characterizes encyclopedic novels makes just such a claim, as is evident if we recall Joyce's desire "to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city one day

suddenly disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book.” The desire to contain reality itself, “everything in the Creation,” is at the heart of encyclopedic narrative and is figured through “synecdoche with a vengeance.” The combination of such intensive synecdoche and *mise en abyme* in the form of paradoxical duplication implies that the text is coterminous not only with the fictional world represented within it but also with the actual world of which it is a part.

The final manner in which this basic organizational pattern of framing singular points functions encyclopedically pertains to the earlier discussion of the encyclopedia as rhizomatic in nature. Singular points frame the events of postmodern encyclopedic novels as singularities shaped like Klein bottles. In doing so, singular points contribute a macrocosmic counterpart to mirror the rhizomatic tendency of the microcosmic sentence style that is typical of encyclopedic narratives. As discussed, Eco, himself a writer of postmodern encyclopedic novels, uses Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the rhizome as a structural model for his hypothesis of the encyclopedia as a global semantic universe. This hypothesis provides a useful means of identifying what makes a novel encyclopedic on the local or microcosmic level: the intensive incorporation and replication of the semantic universe in the novel. The actual world encyclopedia is incorporated *en masse* into the fictional encyclopedia of the novel. More than simply mentioned, however, encyclopedic information is “blown up,” in Eco’s phrase, and made relevant to the reader’s interpretation of the text (SPL 79). In other words, encyclopedic information refuses to remain in the background; in being “blown up” or brought into the foreground, the two frames of reference are once again laminated into a single layer. This incorporation of the actual world encyclopedia manifests itself at the sentence level in the

horizontal and vertical integration of information in the manner of a rhizome. Likewise, the rhizome provides a useful model for understanding the plot organization of the novel as a single surface. As Eco explains, “a rhizomatic whole has neither outside nor inside” (SPL 81). The use of an encyclopedic style thus reinforces the fusion of frames of reference that singular point framing devices signify.

Singular Framing Devices in García Márquez and Rushdie

A brief examination of two of the novels mentioned earlier will help flesh out the pattern I am describing. In some respects, García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* appears at first glance to deviate from the pattern I have suggested. It lacks the formal framing devices of prologue and epilogue found in both *Underworld* and *Invisible Man*; likewise, it lacks the shift from lower diegetic level to higher that occurs at the beginning and conclusion of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. In place of these formal devices, the novel begins with Colonel Aureliano Buendía’s memory of “when his father took him to discover ice” (García Márquez 11), an event described in the narrator’s unblinkingly serious tone as both miracle and technological singularity. As José Arcadio Buendía, the colonel’s father, touches the ice, his “heart fill[s] with fear and jubilation at the contact with mystery,” and he is “Intoxicated by the evidence of the miracle” (García Márquez 26); the first chapter ends with José Arcadio Buendía’s exclamation, “This is the great invention of our time” (García Márquez 26). The novel itself concludes memorably with the destruction of Macondo in “a fearful whirlwind of dust and rubble being spun about by the wrath of the biblical hurricane,” a pre-atomic miracle of destruction (García Márquez 383). These framing events mark singular points comparable to a Nietzschean

forgetting of the past; both combine elements of the miraculous and the technological.

The framed events display the paradoxical qualities typical of a singularity: on the one hand, they mark the century the novel spans as discontinuous from the rest of history; on the other, they frame that century as an authentic synecdoche for the rest of history.

The validity of this microcosm as synecdoche is again figured through the fusion of events into a single surface. This is what Aureliano Babilonia recognizes at the conclusion of the novel as he reads the parchments that contain and construct the history of Macondo. Melquíades, the gypsy who wrote them, “had not put events in the order of man’s conventional time, but had concentrated a century of daily episodes in such a way that they coexisted in one instant” (García Márquez 382). Thus, García Márquez’s singular and miraculous century, full of unique events, “unrepeatable since time immemorial and forever more” (383), is compressed into a single point in both time and space. This singularity becomes evident when Aureliano Babilonia, in reading the parchments, catches up to the present moment, which is also the precise moment that the whirlwind destroys Macondo. The result is a piece of history analogous to Wordsworth’s “Points . . . / Where all stand single” as well as Nietzsche’s “single point,” each defined by its isolation—the same solitude to which García Márquez’s Macondo is condemned. This solitude insures Macondo’s discontinuity from the rest of the world, from history. The judgment comes in the final words of the novel: “races condemned to one hundred years of solitude did not have a second opportunity on earth” (383). Despite the finality of this judgment, however, a question insinuates itself: if no second opportunity *on earth*, then where? Here, the confusion of exterior and interior due to the Klein bottle structure of the novel takes another step: Macondo is itself a textual construct of Melquíades’

writings, condemned to destruction as soon as they are deciphered and read, but both Macondo itself and Melquíades' history find a second opportunity in the novel.

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* begins with a miracle of creation in the form of a singular point in history discontinuous from what had preceded it, "as though history, arriving at a point of the highest significance and promise, had chosen to sow, in that instant, the seeds of a future which would genuinely differ from anything the world had seen up to that time" (195). The singular point marks the independence of India, "the first hour of August 15th, 1947—between midnight and one a.m." when 1001 children were born in the new country (Rushdie 195). Saleem himself was born at the very stroke of midnight, "that hour which is reserved for miracles, which is somehow outside time," at "the precise instant of India's arrival at independence" (Rushdie 212; 9). After beginning with the singular moment of his birth, Saleem immediately jumps back to the "point at which it [his life] really began" (Rushdie 10). In doing so, he doubly frames the opening of the novel with singular points, explaining that the organization of his story is "guided only by the memory of a large white bedsheet with a roughly circular hole some seven inches in diameter cut into the centre" (Rushdie 9). Saleem writes his narrative from his room in a pickle factory; even more than the pickle jars that mirror each of his chapters, he himself functions as *mise en abyme*. Saleem is the paradoxical self-containing figure of the Klein bottle analogous to Melquíades' parchments in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*; Saleem represents the symbolic dissolution between inner and outer that occurs when his memoir catches up to the very moment he is living. As he explains, he contains "an excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumors . . . I have been a swallower of lives . . . Consumed multitudes are jostling and shoving inside

me” (Rushdie 9). Saleem’s “poor body, singular, unlovely” (Rushdie 37) comes more and more to resemble the gypsy’s parchments. By the end, his skin is cracking, becoming “dried out,” “Parched,” “emptied dessicated pickled” (Rushdie 461). The apocalyptic vision which ends the novel invokes the imagery of both the technological singularity of nuclear explosion and a miracle of destruction as Saleem’s consciousness and the lives he contains are dispersed: “cracking now, fission of Saleem, I am the bomb in Bombay, watch me explode, bones splitting, breaking beneath the awful pressure of the crowd . . .” (Rushdie 463). This dispersal resembles Slothrop’s in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, though in contrast to Slothrop’s diffusion into nature, Saleem “crumble[s] into (approximately) six hundred thirty million particles of anonymous, and necessarily oblivious dust” (Rushdie 37) and is “sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes” of Indian people (Rushdie 463). In between these singular points, however, just as the century of Macondo’s existence is focused into Melquíades’ manuscript in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the first thirty years of Indian independence are synecdochically reduced to the single point that is Saleem himself.

Conclusion

If a consideration of singular points in Pynchon’s fiction as well as postmodernism in general must begin with Trilling’s observation of the charm that such points continue to exercise, it would seem that the question this observation leads Trilling to pose would be the next logical consideration: “But how are they to be reached?” Each of the writers considered here offers his own answer to that question. For Wordsworth, these points are to be reached in the isolated regions of the soul; for Maxwell, in the

scientific study of discontinuity; for Nietzsche, in the creation of historical discontinuity through forgetting. Each supposes an idealized continuum or background against which the exceptions of singularities will stand out, allowing the exceptions to be unified. Thus, each supposes a continuity—the soul or history, for instance—underpinning or framing the discontinuity of singularities, much as Lewis uses the supernatural to frame the natural. However, for Pynchon, as for DeLillo, the question of access seems to be of secondary importance; in their technological form, singular points can be figured almost too easily through either the threat or the reality of nuclear explosions. Central to their treatments of singular points is a concern that does not occur to Wordsworth, Maxwell, Nietzsche, or even Trilling: once reached, how is the authenticity associated with these points of singleness to be established and guaranteed? In ironically locating “searing realness” in the videotape of the Texas Highway Killer and offering cyberspace as an alternative idealized continuum, DeLillo suggests that ultimately the authenticity of singular points cannot be guaranteed. Nevertheless, in conflating the two shots heard ’round the world in his prologue, he does find in singularities a means of lowering “the veil of the unhistorical” and thus discovering “the courage to begin” (8; Nietzsche sec 1).

More recently, DeLillo has addressed singularities in describing the power of the unique event in precisely these terms of providing both a point at which and a reason to begin writing. The power of such an event lies in the fact that like a singular point, it seems to mark not just a moment of contact between two frames of reference but a breakdown in such frames altogether. In his response to the collapse of the Twin Towers following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, DeLillo explains that “The event itself has no purchase on the mercies of analogy or simile” (“In the Ruins” 39). Like the

technological equivalent of a miracle of destruction, such an event defies any attempt to put it into context; because it is “too powerful a thing to set into our frame of practiced response,” it breaks the frame of perception through which we normally experience the world (DeLillo “In the Ruins” 35). The result is a completely unironic and overwhelming experience of the “searing realness” that “you” feel when viewing the videotape of a random killing in *Underworld*. It is certainly not, however, a miracle, nor does DeLillo appeal to either a supernatural framework or any alternative in order to recontextualize the event. “In its desertion of every basis for comparison,” he writes, “the event asserts its singularity. There is something empty in the sky. The writer tries to give memory, tenderness, and meaning to all that howling space” (“In the Ruins” 39).⁸ DeLillo might also be describing the opening of *Gravity’s Rainbow*: “A screaming comes across the sky. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now” (Pynchon 3). Singular moments such as these provide the starting points for both DeLillo and Pynchon; they enable forgetting and discontinuity from the framework of the past through their uniqueness, “their desertion of every basis for comparison.”

Endnotes

1. See, for instance, Robert Kane's *Free Will* (2002) and *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will* (2002), Laura Waddell Ekstrom's *Agency and Responsibility: Essays on the Metaphysics of Freedom* (2001), Derk Pereboom's *Free Will* (1997), and Gary Watson's *Free Will* (1982).
2. On Maxwell's Demon, see Ehrenberg. On the role of Maxwell's Demon in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, see Mangel; for a more recent consideration of Maxwell's Demon and entropy in the context of chaos theory, see Hayles (CB 31-60).
3. Lewis mentions only "Christ's single miracle of Destruction, the withering of the fig-tree" (168); the ten plagues of Egypt would be the primary Old Testament examples.
4. As Thomas Schelling explains, the term "critical mass" has been absorbed into the social sciences to describe behavior models that operate on a principle similar to that of the self-sustaining chain reaction: if enough of the behavior exists, the behavior will sustain itself (94-95). One variation of critical mass behavior known as the "tipping point" model is analogous to Maxwell's singular points. See Schelling (87-110) and Gladwell. In the description of Father Rapier's celebration of "Critical Mass" in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon refers to both senses of the phrase (539).

Maxwell's description of singular points also bears more than a passing resemblance to more recent descriptions of chaos theory, though his name is absent from these accounts. The standard introduction to chaos theory for a popular audience remains James Gleick's *Chaos*; for an approach to chaos theory from the perspective of literary criticism, see Hayles's *Chaos Bound* and her anthology, *Chaos and Order*. Maxwell's singular points differ from the physical systems studied by chaos theory in that Maxwell

offers them as analogues for the human mind and human behavior. In this respect, they have more in common with the tipping point variety of critical mass models of behavior.

5. This account of the appearance of Esmeralda's face on the billboard rests on the acceptance of the event as at least possibly miraculous by the characters of the novel.

However, as John N. Duvall points out, DeLillo's description of the event also suggests the possibility that it is a hoax perpetrated by Ismael, the former graffiti artist whose crew has created The Wall to commemorate the deaths of children like Esmeralda

("Excavating" 275). The novel does not definitively privilege any explanation, leaving the question of causation undecided. As Arthur Saltzman writes, "The impenetrability of the event—it cannot be explicated—may also be viewed as the permeability of the event—no one can refute speculations about it" (311). For the purposes of my argument, the relevant fact is that the miraculous is treated as a real possibility by both the narrator and many of the characters who make up the crowd, most notably Sister Edgar. Her acceptance of the vision as an authentic miracle demonstrates the authority of the miraculous, regardless of whether the vision is in fact a miracle.

6. For Duvall's quotation from DeLillo, see DeLillo's "Pafko at the Wall," 65.

7. In addition to Robbe-Grillet's novels, McHale cites Julio Cortázar's "Continuity of Parks," Claude Simon's *Tryptique*, and Christine Brooke-Rose's *Thru* (PF 120); for a lucid and intelligent approach to metalepsis focusing on Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*, see David Herman.

8. In another response, Jean Baudrillard similarly describes the terrorist attacks of September 11 in terms of singularity: "Terrorism is the act that restores an irreducible singularity to the heart of a generalized system of exchange" (14).

Chapter 6

A Cosmology of Singularities: *Gravity's Rainbow*

"He had a dream," I says, "and it shot him."

"Singular dream," he says.—Samuel L. Clemens

Near the end of Samuel L. Clemens's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, after Huck and Tom have finally helped Jim escape from the Phelps's farm and have made it to the freedom of the raft, Jim and Huck are faced with the dilemma of what to do about the bullet in Tom's calf. As Huck expects, Jim insists that they fetch a doctor, and Huck proceeds to find one and bring him back to the raft to tend to Tom's leg. Naturally, Huck has to come up with a story to explain how Tom happened to get shot while trying not to raise the doctor's suspicions about their involvement with Jim's escape and preventing him from mentioning anything to the Phelpses. As he has throughout the novel, Huck lets loose with the first thing that comes to mind:

I told him my brother was over on Spanish Island hunting, yesterday afternoon, and camped on a piece of raft we found, and about midnight he must a kicked his gun in his dreams, for it went off and shot him in the leg, and we wanted him to go over there and fix it and not say nothing about it, nor let anybody know, because we wanted to come home this evening, and surprise the folks. (Clemens 343; ch. 41)

While the doctor does not connect the boys to Jim's escape when he later explains how Jim helped him treat Tom, he does express his doubts about Huck's explanation. He first asks who their folks are, then pauses for a minute before asking Huck, "How'd you say he got shot?" Huck simplifies the story in his response: "He had a dream," I says, "and it shot him." The doctor's blunt response captures his doubts: "'Singular dream,' he says" (Clemens 343; ch. 41).

Huck's explanation is at least metaphorically true. Tom's dreams of romantic adventures, of which the "evasion" is the most elaborate example, have exerted a powerful force on shaping the reality of his own life as well as those of Huck and Jim, whom Tom has subjugated to his vision. Since Tom's wound occurs as a result of these dreams, Huck is not far from the truth when he says, "He had a dream . . . and it shot him." Tom finds the allure of the evasion so much more attractive than mundane reality that, as Huck explains, "if he could only see his way to it we would keep it up all the rest of our lives and leave Jim to our children to get out" (Clemens 310; ch. 36). When Tom is later shot in the escape attempt, he finally has tangible proof of the reality of his adventures and his own status as romantic hero. With this in mind, the singular quality of the dream that shoots Tom can be profitably compared to the singular points discussed in the previous chapter.

The singularity of the dream Huck invents derives from the moment of contact between two orders of being that it supposes. The order of being represented by the dream contacts and actually causes something—and something quite violent—to happen in the actual world of the novel. The dream provides an alternative framework of explanation for historical causation. Of course, Huck is lying, so this alternative

framework hardly strikes one as valid. Reading the dream as metaphor for Tom's romantic view of the world, however, gives Huck's explanation of the bullet wound the ring of authenticity, if not of truth. In fact, given the way in which Tom's romantic conception of reality comes to dominate the novel upon his reappearance, even subjecting both Huck and Jim to its demands, one might be led to ask the questions DeLillo poses concerning cyberspace: is it "a thing within the world or is it the other way around? Which contains the other, and how can you tell for sure?" (U 826). Tom's romanticism offers itself as a seductive and seemingly authentic frame for reality; in doing so, however, it determines the ridiculous and dehumanizing course of actions the boys must take in order to "free" Jim. Pynchon also explores the use of dreams as a means of representing a moment of contact between two orders of being. Rather than acting as simply another means of containing experience, a substitute for historical or theological models of causation, Pynchon relies on dreams in his attempt to represent an unframed reality. In a typical paradox, he uses singular points as framing devices to foreground this unframed reality. The effect of this structure is to present the possibility of an escape from determinism into the authentic freedom of being that each of the writers discussed in the previous chapter associates with singular points.

Singular Points in Pynchon's Fiction

Pynchon consistently organizes his novels around turning points in history, moments in time full of apocalyptic possibility that he refers to variously as cusps, nodes, discontinuities, singular points, and singularities. Despite the distinctions made in the previous chapter between singular points and singularities as well as additional

distinctions that apply to the mathematical denotations of these two terms, Pynchon uses the expressions interchangeably. By doing so, he contributes further to the fusion of frame and contents evident in his novels. Pynchon intensifies the significance and resonance of these moments through the encyclopedic accretion of tangentially related information, charging them with apocalyptic potential. In the end, however, these moments of possibility remain either anti-climactically unfulfilled, as at the end of *V.* when Herbert Stencil's "approach and avoid" method leads him to leave Malta for Stockholm to pursue yet more unpromising clues; anti-climactically fulfilled, as when Prairie Wheeler's long-awaited meeting with her mother near the conclusion of *Vineland* goes by almost unnoticed;¹ or postponed beyond the end of the novel, as with the mystery of the bidder's identity at the conclusion of *The Crying of Lot 49* and the suspension of the rocket at "its last unmeasurable gap" above the roof of the theater in *Gravity's Rainbow* (Pynchon 760).

The moments to which Pynchon's novels build are mirrored by similar cusps in the pasts of the novels' fictional worlds. As much as these earlier cusps are infused with possibility, however, they are inevitably "reduced to Certainty" and become the originating moments that determine and explain the present from which his narrators retrospectively describe the events of each novel (Pynchon M&D 45).² Pynchon's narrator captures the instantaneous and unnoticed transformation from cusp-of-possibility to deterministic-turning-point most clearly in *Gravity's Rainbow* when he considers the history of William Slothrop, Tyrone's ancestor and the author of a religious tract in support of the holiness of the Preterite, arguing that the status of the Elect depends on their relation to the damned. As a result of the publication of this tract, William is

banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony, his book burned in Boston.³ The narrator identifies the opportunity lost when William Slothrop was banished with the opportunities offered by the chaotic Zone of post-V-E Day Germany in which Tyrone Slothrop finds himself centuries later:

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

Pynchon envisions the Zone in terms of a Cartesian grid, specifically a grid with the coordinate axes removed. The Zone represents a completely undetermined point in space and time and thus offers the possibility that a new starting point, unconnected to and undetermined by the history that preceded it, might be found. However, such points in Pynchon's fiction repeatedly result in wrong turns being taken, as is the case in the above examples of both William Slothrop's America and the Zone that his deconstruction (or depolarization) of Elect and Preterite prefigures. Though the Zone briefly offers a blank map from which to start anew, it is quickly reintegrated into the old "set of coordinates." The possibility for change is lost, repeating the earlier wrong turn that America had taken

in banishing William Slothrop. Confirmation that the wrong turn is in fact taken in the Zone comes, of course, in the form of the ICBM that hangs over the end of the novel. The undifferentiated waste of the Zone at first resembles the “impasto, feet thick, of unbelievable black topsoil in which anything could grow” found on the roof of Pirate Prentice’s maisonette at the beginning of the novel (Pynchon GR 5),⁴ but rather than producing eighteen-inch bananas, the Zone produces the over-sized nuclear missile. In his description of the possibility that resides in the waste of the Zone before it is reduced to certainty and reintegrated, Pynchon employs a specifically mathematical image—“a single set of coordinates from which to proceed.” A new set of coordinates, in providing the single point in relation to which all other points are reckoned, would define the coordinate system’s origin, the point where the x- and y-axes intersect, the center of a graph.

Singularities and Genealogy

Pynchon’s practice of looking to moments of apocalyptic possibility that, in being reduced to certainty, become the moments of origin for a later state of events is comparable to the genealogical approach to history that Michel Foucault outlines in his essay “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History.”⁵ The approach to history that Foucault advocates in this essay, while derived directly from Nietzsche’s historiography, also resembles to the approach to science Maxwell advocates at the end of “Science and Free Will,” one focused on “the study of the singularities and instabilities, rather than the continuities and stabilities of things” (444). Foucault identifies three uses of genealogical history: “The first is parodic, directed against reality, and opposes the theme of history as reminiscence

or recognition; the second is dissociative, directed against identity, and opposes history given as continuity or representative of a tradition; the third is sacrificial, directed against truth, and opposes history as knowledge” (160).⁶ The importance of the first and third of these qualities in Pynchon’s work has been discussed at length in the previous chapters: Pynchon’s novels, like Foucault’s genealogy, portray history “in the form of a concerted carnival” (Foucault 161). Likewise, as the Reverend Cherrycoke makes clear in his epigraph on history, “Facts are but the Play-things of lawyers”; history cannot “pretend to the Veracity” of chronology. While the Reverend’s philosophy of history differs from Foucault’s in supporting the idea of “history as knowledge,” it is a pluralistic knowledge that, like genealogy, is aligned against any totalizing system of Truth. While the Reverend supports the idea of “history as knowledge,” he does not go so far as to offer his history as knowledge of Truth.

The second use Foucault delineates for history is worth exploring, particularly since it immediately brings to mind Slothrop’s quest for self-knowledge: “The purpose of history, guided by genealogy,” Foucault explains further, “is not to discover the roots of our identity but to commit itself to its dissipation. It does not seek to define our unique threshold of emergence, the homeland to which metaphysicians promise a return; it seeks to make visible all of those discontinuities that cross us” (162). Slothrop’s investigations of his own history enact this process in a literal sense. Though his quest results in the discovery of information relating to his childhood and the experiments performed upon him, a true understanding of his identity eludes him, the various forces tracking him, and the reader; over the course of the second half of the novel, the truth of his identity ceases to be the point of his quest, if not the reader’s. The precise nature of the connection

between Slothrop's erections and the rocket remains more uncertain than ever at the end of the novel. Rather than discovering the source of his identity and an explanation for his connection to the rocket, Slothrop's quest, the most significant principle of plot organization in the novel, ends in disintegration, like Slothrop himself.

While "Slothrop's Progress" enacts the dissociation of identity that is the goal of genealogical history at the microcosmic level, Pynchon's work as a whole also "seeks to make visible all of those discontinuities that cross us." For Foucault, a discontinuity is equivalent to "the singular event" that "[a]n entire historical tradition (theological or rationalistic) aims at dissolving . . . into an ideal continuity" (154). In other words, Foucault's discontinuities are precisely the singular points discussed in the previous chapter. Foucault's call for genealogical history is an attempt to prevent such singular points from being ignored or explained away. Furthermore, Foucault's discontinuities are analogous to the cusps or turning points around which Pynchon organizes his fictions; not only does Pynchon also employ the term discontinuity, but the term resonates even more broadly due to his reliance on science and mathematics as the sources of metaphors with which to describe his approach to history. In Pynchon's earliest work (his short stories "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna," "Entropy," and his first novel, *V.*, for instance), he looks no further than the second law of thermodynamics for a metaphor with which to figure his approach to history. In his later novels, however, Pynchon broadens his range of metaphor to include many other areas of science, creating a multi-layered and sometimes conflicting treatment of history.

Examples of the theological and rationalistic varieties of traditional historiography that Foucault mentions can be found in Hugh Blair and C. S. Lewis,

respectively. Both suppose “an ideal continuity” that can absorb the uniqueness of the singular point. For Blair, this continuity is the chain of causation discussed earlier “which binds together remote, and seemingly unconnected events” (395; lect. 35). The strength of this chain derives from the authority of “good sense and reason” (387; lect. 35). Every event can be made a part of the chain, can and should be made subject to the master narrative of history. It is precisely this method of historiography that Nietzsche is criticizing when he complains that the weight of this history “causes our whole being [to be] divided, half mechanically, into an inner and an outer side,” resulting in a loss of authenticity (68; sec. 10). The authority of Blair’s chain of historical causation becomes oppressive; for Nietzsche it is a different kind of chain: “For as we are merely the resultant of previous generations, we are also the resultant of their errors, passions, and crimes; it is impossible to shake off this chain” (21; sec. 3). Furthermore, this chain of historical enslavement is precisely the chain Pynchon evokes in *Mason & Dixon* when he describes “the Wrongs committed Daily against the Slaves, petty and grave ones alike, going unrecorded, charm’d invisible to history, invisible yet possessing Mass, and Velocity, able not only to rattle Chains but to break them as well” (68). The singular points or discontinuities in the chain of historical causation provide Pynchon with the events he uses to frame his narratives in both *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon*.

For Lewis, the “ideal continuity” is divine in nature. The supernatural frame that contains the natural world allows for continuity even when that continuity is not apparent to humans. However, it too finds its model in the idea of a chain of causation, though one that allows for supernatural causes. Thus Lewis explains, “To find how [a miracle] is interlocked with the previous history of Nature you must replace both Nature and the

miracle in a larger context. Everything *is* connected with everything else: but not all things are connected by the short and straight roads we expected” (74). Lewis’s phrasing must strike any reader of Pynchon as ironic. In Pynchon’s novels, the belief that “*everything is connected*” is a manifestation of paranoia (GR 703). From this point of view, the idealized continuity that links all events resembles a deterministic frame around human activities. Throughout his fiction, Pynchon deconstructs the binary pair formed by paranoia and its opposite, anti-paranoia, “where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long” (Pynchon GR 434). In calling this opposition into question, Pynchon offers the “excluded middle” of *The Crying of Lot 49* (136), the statistical probabilities of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and the “realm of the Subjunctive” in *Mason & Dixon* (543). In these alternatives to the idealized continuities of both Blair and Lewis on the one hand and utter chaos on the other, Pynchon allows for the possibility of the spontaneous event—the singular point that the traditions represented by Blair and Lewis attempt to suppress.

Singularities in *Gravity’s Rainbow*

Foucault’s description of the genealogical goal of making discontinuities visible is particularly relevant to Pynchon’s approach to history in *Mason & Dixon*. In this novel, Pynchon’s portrayal of the “mak[ing] visible” of heavenly bodies in astronomy parallels the Reverend Cherrycoke’s efforts to “make visible” historical discontinuities in the form of events and people that have been “charm’d invisible to history.” However, Pynchon’s use of astronomy in his most recent novel evolves out of his earlier use of mathematics as well as astronomy in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, where he offers his most extended treatment of

historical discontinuity. In the earlier novel, Pynchon literalizes the concept of historical discontinuity through his use of calculus.⁷ In mathematics, a discontinuity can be either “a point at which a function is defined but not continuous” or “a point at which a function is undefined” (“discontinuity” AHD). The latter type is known as an infinite discontinuity (“discontinuity” James 112-13). As N. Katherine Hayles points out, infinite discontinuities are also commonly referred to as singularities, “points in mathematical functions where the derivative, or rate of change, of the function becomes discontinuous. One example of a singularity is a point where a function peaks sharply. . . . [A]t a singularity the rate of change that the differential attempts to express goes to infinity” (Hayles CW 190). Pynchon uses the graph of an infinite discontinuity as an analogy for a moment of “cataclysm” in a person’s life (GR 664). Hayles’s analysis of *Gravity’s Rainbow* from the perspective of scientific field theory offers the most insightful analysis to date of the importance of singularities in the novel and convincingly demonstrates Pynchon’s use of the concept of singularity as well as his invocation of the concept’s significance in both mathematics and physics.⁸

In physics, “singularity” is the term given to “infinitely dense point[s]” such as the Friedmann point “from which the present Universe expanded” (Pynchon GR 396). As Hayles points out, Alexander Friedmann, the physicist for whom this type of point was named, is “commonly regarded as the father of the ‘Big Bang’ theory” (Hayles CW 190). Other such infinitely dense points exist in the form of black holes; Hayles argues that Pynchon’s direct reference to the Friedmann point comes in conjunction with several indirect allusions to black holes (Hayles CW 194). Pynchon’s reference to the Friedmann point is itself enough to suggest his familiarity with the concept of black holes, but

Hayles tries very hard to offer additional support. In the end, Hayles's reading is an excellent example of the way in which *Gravity's Rainbow* encourages the reader to see connections and the willingness and desire of most readers to respond to such encouragement. However, to read the novel as one is encouraged to read it is to succumb to paranoia. In her determination to discover connections embedded in the text, Hayles misreads not one but two sources. In moving from the topic of singularities in general to black holes in particular, Hayles writes,

The event horizon [the boundary within which light cannot escape the gravity of a black hole] has a magnitude calculated by the Schwarzschild [*sic*] radius, named after Karl Schwarzschild [*sic*], who noticed, in 1917, anomalies in Einstein's gravitational equations that were later recognized to describe black holes. Once a star contracts beyond its Schwarzschild [*sic*] radius, P. C. W Davies writes, "the whole mass implodes to a zero volume and infinite density" . . . In Pynchon's text, "Schwarzschild" [*sic*] is the Jamf code name for the infant Slothrop. The correspondence suggests that black holes are the charismatic objects in the scientific model that play a role analogous to Slothrop in the plot. (CW 194)

First, Hayles misreads Davies. The magnitude of the event horizon of a black hole is known as the Schwarzschild radius, as Davies states correctly (98), and is named for the physicist Karl Schwarzschild. Secondly, Hayles misreads *Gravity's Rainbow*: when Slothrop reads Jamf's codebook, he sees that "Across from 'Schwarzknabe,' now, are the initials 'T.S.'" (Pynchon GR 286). Slothrop identifies the initials as his own; "Schwarzknabe," of course, translates as "black-child," but neither Karl Schwarzschild's

surname nor Hayles's word "Schwarzchild" appear in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Hayles's desire to see a connection between Slothrop and black holes apparently leads her to fuse the two words. This is not to say that there is no possibility of a connection here; Pynchon's direct reference to the Friedmann point alone is enough to suggest at least a layman's familiarity with black holes. However, the connection Hayles identifies in equating Slothrop, Schwarzknabe/Schwarzchild, Schwarzschild, and event horizon is much less clear than she makes it seem. In his authoritative *A Gravity's Rainbow Companion*, Weisenburger points out that the term "Schwarzchild" does not appear in the novel, making the connection Hayles draws "tenuous: wholly reliant upon the reader's (not Pynchon's) translation" (193); however, Weisenburger accepts and perpetuates Hayles's misspelling of Karl Schwarzschild's surname.

Better evidence of Pynchon's familiarity with black holes and his willingness to use such phenomena metaphorically can be found in his description of the effect Katje Borgesius has on Pirate Prentice just after Father Rapier's "Critical Mass" during the surreal "Convention" of spies and informers: Pirate is "astonished to feel himself beginning to *collapse*, like a stack of rifles, around her feet, caught in her gravitation, distances abolished, waveforms unmeasurable [. . .]. He has fallen: she has lost her surface" (GR 538, 545). "Gravitational collapse" is the process that results in the formation of a black hole; the former phrase has lost currency with the popularity of the latter. In any event, Hayles reads these references to singularities in *Gravity's Rainbow*—both the ones she reads into the novel as well as those she correctly identifies—as "suggest[ing] that Pynchon's mythic Flight from the Center is an imaginative reconstruction of the scientific model of an expanding universe" (CW 190).

In contrast, approaching Pynchon's fiction from the perspective of Foucault's genealogical history suggests that rather than merely trying to reconstruct a particular scientific model, Pynchon selects suitable scientific models in order to provide analogies and metaphors that shed light on his treatment of history.

Pynchon's direct commentary on the nature and significance of singular points comes primarily in two extended reveries from the narrator. In the first, the description of Slothrop as he prepares to whip the insides of Greta Erdmann's thighs before having sex with her leads the narrator onto the subject of the nature and significance of singularities. Focusing on Erdmann's "stockings pulled up tight in classic cusps by the suspenders of the boned black rig she's wearing underneath," the narrator exclaims, "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!" (Pynchon GR 396). In describing the initial image, Pynchon introduces the terms "cusp" and "singular point," thus preparing for the mathematical turn that the narrator's reflections soon take: "there is much more here—there is a cosmology: of nodes and cusps and points of osculation, mathematical kisses . . . *singularities!*" The image of the stocking-tops that inspires this reverie, then, is a mundane manifestation of a macrocosmic phenomenon of this fictional world. In mathematics, nodes, cusps, and points of osculation are each classified as singular points. Somewhat confusingly, "Cusps, crunodes, isolated points, and multiple points are [all] singular points," singular in this sense being defined in contrast to an ordinary point ("point"). Each type of singular point Pynchon mentions is in fact a double point, a point on a curve shared by two branches of the curve at which the two branches may be said to "kiss"; the

differences in the terms have to do with the shape of the curves and the placement of the tangents of the curves at the double point (“point”).⁹ A cosmology based on these phenomena would be one based on the glorification of sudden, radical change, momentary convergence followed by rapid divergence: a universe ordered around moments of apocalypse. To pun on the connotations of the word (Pynchon being a connoisseur of the bad pun), events before and after these moments would be only tangentially related.

The cosmology briefly outlined here by the narrator logically culminates in “*singularities!*”, those moments of discontinuity discussed previously. It is important to note, however, that singular points such as cusps, nodes, and points of osculation differ in a significant way from the other type of singularity Pynchon later mentions and on which Hayles focuses. The narrator’s second meditation on the subject in *Gravity’s Rainbow* comes in a long digression involving a Polish undertaker who takes to his rowboat during a thunderstorm, “wearing, in hopes it will draw electricity, a complicated metal suit” so that in being struck by lightning he might experience a “singularity” (Pynchon GR 663). The narrator explains the undertaker’s thinking:

Well, it’s a matter of continuity. Most people’s lives have ups and downs that are relatively gradual, a sinuous curve with first derivatives at every point. They’re the ones who never get struck by lightning. No real idea of cataclysm at all. But the ones who do get hit experience a singular point, a discontinuity in the curve of life—do you know what the time rate of change *is* at a cusp? *Infinity*, that’s what! A-and right across the point, it’s *minus* infinity! How’s *that* for sudden change, eh?” (Pynchon GR 664)

Here, Pynchon employs the terms “singular point,” “discontinuity,” and “cusp” interchangeably; technically, however, the terms are not synonymous, though their graphs look roughly similar.¹⁰ The difference is “a matter of continuity”: singular points, such as cusps and nodes, are continuous; the discontinuity the undertaker seeks to experience, obviously, is not. A singularity in the latter sense is more accurately described as the aforementioned infinite discontinuity; this is the definition Hayles relies on when she argues that “In Pynchon’s view, singularities pose a particular threat to the differential calculus because at a singularity the rate of change that the differential attempts to express goes to infinity. . . . The singularity thus represents a point where the behavior of the function ceases to be mathematically expressible” (CW 190-91). At this type of singularity, the derivative (the slope of a curve or, more accurately, the slope of the line tangent to the curve at a given point) is undefined, and herein lies its appeal for Hayles:

The singularity, concealing a point so mysterious that calculus, no matter how infinitesimal its intervals, can never capture it, is the mathematical equivalent to Slothrop’s insouciant wandering. . . . [L]ike King Kong, Slothrop, or the Rocket, singularities possess the charismatic power to disrupt business-as-usual with their uncontrollable behavior. (Hayles CW 192)

In her personification of singularities as “mysterious” objects that behave uncontrollably, Hayles reveals that she has already accepted the cosmology the narrator offers in his paranoid speculations; nonetheless, her association of singularities with the other sources of charismatic power in the novel is clearly supported by the text. Hayles does not,

however, recognize Pynchon's conflation of singular points (cusps and nodes in which the branches of the curve converge and remain continuous) and singularities (infinite discontinuities at which the branches of the curve approach but never actually converge, remaining separated by the "gnat's ass or red cunt hair of the Δt across the point" [Pynchon GR 664]).

In both of his digressions on the subject, the narrator describes the charismatic power of singularities, which Hayles identifies as their defining quality. This charisma or singularity derives from the authenticity associated with singular points. Returning to the first discussion, the narrator explains, "In each case, the change from point to no-point carries a luminosity and enigma at which something in us must leap and sing, or withdraw in fright. [. . .] Do all these points imply, like the Rocket's, an annihilation?" (Pynchon GR 396). "[T]hese points" to which the narrator refers are objects that visually resemble the graph of a singularity, cycloid, or cusp: "cathedral spires," "minarets," "trainwheels over the points," "mountain peaks," "the edges of steel razors," "rose thorns," culminating in the final item on the list, the Friedmann point, a singularity of a different order than the other items listed (Pynchon GR 396). With the exception of the Friedmann point, each item in the list resembles the graph of a cusp or singularity; in the case of "trainwheels over the points as you watch peeling away the track you didn't take" (Pynchon GR 396), Pynchon invokes dual images: the two train tracks coming together suggest the graph of a cusp; in addition, however, the image of "trainwheels over the points" is almost a textbook description of the shape of a cycloid: "The plane locus of a point which is fixed on the circumference of a circle, as the circle rolls upon a straight line. *E.g.*, the path described by a point on the rim of a wheel" ("cycloid"). The resulting

curve resembles a scalloped border; the point where one scallop meets the next is a cusp. In Pynchon's image, as the trainwheels pass over the cusp-like junction of tracks they also inscribe the image of a cycloid. Each of these items evokes an image of singular points. The "annihilation" the narrator associates with these points is not just the literal destruction of the rocket but the figurative forms of destruction resulting from singular points. These can be traced back through the breakdown of the distinction between microcosm and macrocosm, Nietzsche's "forgetting," the loss of self Emerson experiences during his moment of transcendence, and so on. The dual nature of these earlier examples of singular points is also evident. The possibility of local discontinuity implied by the threat of "annihilation" is joined with the global continuity created by linking the different images. The image of the cycloid in particular captures this polarity with its sequence of linked cusps.

The narrator's questioning whether each of these items implies the potential for the sudden and radical transformation that is made literal in the destructive power of the rocket certainly justifies Hayles's inclusion of singularities in a list of the novel's charismatic objects. However, rather than simply adding singularities to the list of sources of charisma in the novel, the narrator's emphasis suggests that the charismatic power "to disrupt business-as-usual with [. . .] uncontrollable behavior" is itself derived from the condition of singularity. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, singularity is thus a matter of resemblance to the graph of a singularity only on the most superficial level, though the idea of a discontinuous point on the graph of a function at which the rate of change of the derivative approaches infinity remains integral to Pynchon's scheme of metaphors. Pynchon extends the metaphorical condition of singularity to anything that offers the

potential of radical and sudden metamorphosis, from regions in space to moments in time, including both characters and objects.¹¹

Pynchon bases his metaphor on three different literal senses of singularity and broadens the range of reference by employing the different senses interchangeably. First, singularity refers to a singular point, the point at which two branches of a curve converge, as in a cusp. Secondly, singularity refers to the infinitesimally small gap of an infinite discontinuity, the point that two branches of a curve approach but never meet. Lastly, singularity refers to an infinitely dense point in spacetime such as the Friedmann point or a black hole. Pynchon alludes to each of these senses in figuring his approach to history. Thus, the moment at which America failed to choose the fork in the road represented by William Slothrop's deconstruction of the hierarchy of Elect and Preterite may be "the singular point she jumped the wrong way from," a historical cusp that offered the unrealized possibility of change. Since the transformative power of this singular point remains unrealized, it does not become a singularity of the second kind, that is, a discontinuity. Even in the particular instance that gives rise to the narrator's reflections, the image of Greta Erdmann's stockings meeting suspender and the abrupt change from silk to skin implies at least the possibility of personal annihilation, if only temporary, through the sado-masochism of the sex act that follows.

As points in space, Pynchon's singularities are not only the sharp tips of mountains, steeples, and rockets; these are merely the most obvious visual suggestions of singularity. In each case, the sharp point that resembles the graph of a singularity or cusp stands in as a synecdoche. The rocket itself is thus one of the more important singularities in the novel. Likewise, Slothrop and King Kong, both of whom Hayles also

mentions as charismatic figures, represent metaphorical singularities capable of “uncontrollable behavior.” Pynchon indicates this quality by synecdochically and metonymically associating both Slothrop and King Kong with images that resemble the sharp points of mathematical singularities: Slothrop’s penis repeatedly functions as a synecdoche for Slothrop himself; in addition, he is consistently identified through his close association with the rocket. King Kong is referred to as “the black scapeape we cast down like Lucifer from the tallest erection in the world” (Pynchon GR 275). These charismatic figures function as metaphorical singular points because they represent the possibility of events that resist assimilation into the “ideal continuity” of historical causation. Like DeLillo’s description of the singular event, Slothrop, King Kong, and the rocket signify the “desertion of every basis for comparison” (“In the Ruins” 39).

Slothrop in particular cannot be incorporated into any of the frames of reference, whether it be Pointsman’s behaviorism, Mexico’s statistical probabilities, or even the paranormal psychology of “The White Visitation.” Slothrop represents an incarnation of singularity on the microcosmic scale. The mystery over his erections is the preeminent figuration of effects without causes in the novel. For Weisenburger, Slothrop’s erections provide “the chief example” of the novel’s master trope, *hysteron proteron* (FS 247). Weisenburger’s insistence upon Slothrop’s erections as effects that precede their causes seems misplaced, however, considering that no definitive causes are ever revealed. Like Slothrop himself, his erections can best be read as examples of singular points.

The Zone as Historical Singularity

These sources of charismatic power constitute the loci of unpredictability and uncontrollability around which Pynchon builds his novels—that is, they provide the centers of gravity for Pynchon’s novels. The most prominent such locus in *Gravity’s Rainbow* is the Zone. Occupying both the middle months of 1945 and the geographical area of what had been Germany as well as the third and longest section of the novel, the Zone is an undefined point in both space and time: “all the fences are down,” and maps no longer apply. As a result, the Zone offers the possibility of revolutionary transformation. In his meditation on the significance of William Slothrop in American history, the narrator’s language suggests that the Zone is both an undefined region on the map and a discontinuity in the graph of a function: “maybe for a little while all the fences are down [. . .] and somewhere inside the waste of it [is] a single set of coordinates from which to proceed.” Furthermore, like William Slothrop himself, the Zone constitutes a singular point in history in multiple senses of the term. First, to return to the mathematical definition of singular point, the Zone is singular in that it marks a location where multiple branches of a curve overlap (in contrast to an ordinary point), the metaphorical curve in this case being the plots and subplots of the novel, all of which converge in the third section. Secondly, as a result of the fall of the German government, the Zone marks a region of political discontinuity analogous to the undefined point in the graph of a singularity. In addition, the Zone parallels Nietzsche’s description of the process of drawing a limited horizon around oneself in order to create “the unhistorical atmosphere in which every great event happens” (9; sec. I). This atmosphere of forgetfulness is reflected in the erasure of boundaries in the Zone.

In representing the Zone as a historical singularity, Pynchon conflates the denotations of singularity in both mathematics and physics in the attempt, like Foucault's genealogy, "to make visible all those discontinuities that cross us." However, the sleight-of-hand Pynchon employs in conflating the multiple senses of singularity has important ramifications because of the essential differences in the several meanings. Pynchon's imagery often indicates "that he is using singularity in the sense of a sharp peak in the function" (Hayles CW 190). In the case of the Polish undertaker who hopes to be struck by lightning, the sharp peak in question would result in a graph of the function that is discontinuous: the two branches of the curve approach the point of discontinuity but never converge, always separated by the "gnat's-ass or red cunt hair of the Δt across the point."¹² However, Pynchon juxtaposes the sense of singularity as infinite discontinuity seen in the example of the undertaker with the opposing sense of singularity as point of convergence, as in a cusp. As a result, Pynchon's use of singularities simultaneously indicates convergence and a failure to converge, like the singular points discussed in the previous chapter. Similarly, in physics, singularities mark points of both complete convergence and complete divergence: the Friedmann point from which the universe theoretically expanded contained all of the matter in the universe, and singularities in the form of black holes result from the collapse of the mass of a star into a single point of zero size and zero volume, creating a literal singular point of complete convergence; at the same time, however, all of the matter in a black hole becomes inaccessible to any outside observer, thus making a black hole a point of divergence from the rest of the universe. The metaphorical singularities in Pynchon's fiction thus function paradoxically as points of both rupture and convergence or, perhaps, rupture as a result of convergence,

though Pynchon consistently problematizes the notions of cause and effect at these points where possibilities proliferate.

Historical Singularities and “Is It O.K. To Be a Luddite?”

Pynchon’s 1984 essay “Is It O.K. To Be a Luddite?” marks nearly the midpoint between his two major novels and displays several of the same concerns and interests that he develops in both *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon*.¹³ Of particular interest is Pynchon’s treatment of the kind of historical singular point that he describes in *Gravity’s Rainbow* and returns to in *Mason & Dixon*. Pynchon takes as his starting point C. P. Snow’s warning against the polarization of contemporary society into the cultures of literature and science in “The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution,” written a quarter-century earlier. After briefly examining the few basic facts behind the etymology of the term “Luddite” and the actions of those first called Luddites, Pynchon shifts to the relevant literature, sketching the qualities that would make *Frankenstein* and *The Castle of Otranto* the paradigmatic examples “if there were such a genre as the Luddite novel” (“Is It O.K.” 40). Science fiction, according to Pynchon, has taken the place of gothic fiction as the Luddite mode of choice in the twentieth century; even more, he argues that science fiction, particularly that written during the ten years following America’s use of atomic weapons in Japan, “was just as important as the Beat movement going on at the same time, certainly more important than mainstream fiction” (“Is It O.K.” 41). Pynchon concludes his essay with a look at the events that science fiction writers were responding to and the hope that the availability of information resulting from “the Computer Age”

may finally bridge the gap between the two cultures, allowing Luddites “to stand on common ground with their Snovian adversaries” (“Is It O.K.” 41).

Pynchon’s brief consideration of the recent past and his reflections on what possibilities the future might hold demonstrate the consistency of his approach to history via mathematical metaphors in both his novels and his occasional nonfiction. In fact, in describing the arc of recent history in “Luddite,” Pynchon employs essentially the same trope he employs in *Gravity’s Rainbow*: “By 1945, the factory system [. . .] had been extended to include the Manhattan Project, the German long-range rocket program and the death camps, such as Auschwitz. It has taken no major gift of prophecy to see how these three curves of development might plausibly converge, and before too long” (“Is It O.K.” 41). Pynchon similarly frames the attempt at prophecy that closes the essay in terms of curves converging, as in a cusp:

If our world survives, the next great challenge to watch out for will come—you heard it here first—when the curves of research and development in artificial intelligence, molecular biology and robotics all converge. Oboy. It will be amazing and unpredictable, and even the biggest of brass, let us devoutly hope, are going to be caught flat-footed. It is certainly something for all good Luddites to look forward to if, God willing, we should live so long. (“Is It O.K.” 41)

Pynchon falls comfortably into describing scientific progress through a geometric metaphor. In addition, like the singularities he describes in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, here the moment of convergence promises the same potential for radical change and rupture with the past. Once again, Pynchon conflates the meaning of singular point—such as the point

of convergence at which the two branches of a cusp meet—with the meaning of singularity—an infinite discontinuity at which the two branches of a curve approach but never converge. The power of this historical convergence, Pynchon suggests, is such that it will result in a moment of discontinuity, “amazing and unpredictable.” Here, however, in contrast to his fiction, Pynchon describes this potential in uncharacteristically and unambiguously positive terms as he predicts that we may “realize all the wistful pipe dreams of our days” (“Is It O.K.” 41). In fact, Pynchon explicitly makes the connection between historical singular points and miracles that DeLillo also suggests through his juxtaposition of nuclear explosions and the appearance of the face of Esmeralda, the young homeless girl who is raped and murdered, on the billboard at the end of *Underworld*: “If the logistics can be worked out,” he writes, “miracles may yet be possible” (Luddite” 41).

Luddites & Badasses

Pynchon’s confidence at the end of his essay comes despite his observation early on that “Except maybe for Brainy Smurf, it’s hard to imagine anybody these days wanting to be called a literary intellectual” (“Is It O.K.” 40). For the moment at least, there are still people—and not just academics—“who read and think” about novels, even encyclopedic novels such as Pynchon’s, which, given the explosion of electronic and digital forms of entertainment over the past half-century and particularly in the years since Pynchon’s essay was published, often seem the relics of an earlier age (“Is It O.K.” 40). Of course, even novels that really are relics of earlier ages are still at least occasionally read. As Pynchon points out, a novel like *Frankenstein*, for instance,

“remains today well worth reading, for all the reasons we read novels” (“Is It O.K.” 40). We read novels for many of the same reasons we seek any form of entertainment; Pynchon suggests that some, if not all, of the reasons we read novels like *Frankenstein* can be found in “the craze for Gothic fiction,” the roots of which he locates in the “deep and religious yearnings for that earlier mystic time which had come to be known as the Age of Miracles” (“Is It O.K.” 40). In contemporary times, this motivation for reading and writing has evolved, but “Like their earlier counterparts, 20th-century Luddites looked back yearningly to another age—curiously the same Age of Reason which had forced the first Luddites into nostalgia for the Age of Miracles” (Pynchon “Is It O.K.” 41). At the heart of both instances of nostalgia is “the same profound unwillingness to give up elements of faith, however ‘irrational,’ to an emerging technopolitical order that might or might not know what it [is] doing” (Pynchon “Is It O.K.” 41). The justification of faith in the face of, first, the Age of Reason and, second, the Computer Age becomes for Pynchon the central problem facing the novelist, particularly the novelist who thinks it *is* o.k. to be a Luddite but who still wishes to be taken seriously. The problem is essentially a matter of authority: how to assert convincingly “the limited wish that living things, earthly and otherwise, may on occasion become Bad and Big enough to take part in transcendent doings” (Pynchon “Is It O.K.” 41). The limitations on this wish result from the growing power of technology and the concomitant displacement of human beings from “transcendent doings,” limiting factors that show no signs of lessening. Thus, one of the main reasons behind “the craze for Gothic fiction” is the compelling portrayal of the literary figure Pynchon terms “the Badass.”

The works Pynchon focuses on in his essay, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, are not only examples of Gothic fiction but are also more generally classified as romances. The distinction between romance and novel is important with regard to the figure of the Badass. According to Northrop Frye, "The essential difference between novel and romance lies in the conception of characterization" (304). Since the romance "does not attempt to create 'real people' so much as stylized figures which expand into psychological archetypes," it lends itself to allegory and becomes "a more revolutionary form than the novel" (Frye 304-305). Novels are more conservative, taking conventional society as their subject and ordinary men as their protagonists; romances, on the other hand, center on heroes (Frye 306). Pynchon's Badass is a romantic hero whose defining characteristics are that "he is Bad, and he is Big. Bad meaning not morally evil, necessarily, more like able to work mischief on a large scale. What is important here is the amplifying of scale, the multiplication of effect" ("Is It O.K." 40). Pynchon's description of the Badass echoes James Clerk Maxwell's description of the way in which singular points produce great consequences as the result of minute amounts of force. However, in contrast to Maxwell's singular points, which are infinitely small, the Badass is monstrously large. As the personification of a singular point, the Badass's size itself demonstrates the "amplifying of scale" Pynchon mentions. The qualities that define Pynchon's Badass are also the primary characteristics of his encyclopedic style. "Amplif[ication] of scale" and "multiplication of effect" are precisely the goals of the aggressive integration found in encyclopedic narratives; the large-scale incorporation of encyclopedic information

provides the authority on which the encyclopedist offers the novel as synecdoche for the entire macrocosm.

Portraying such a singular figure convincingly is no easy task, however. Writers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were much closer to the Age of Miracles than Pynchon and other contemporary novelists, but even Shelley and Walpole were in danger of “being judged by the literary mainstream as Insufficiently Serious” (Pynchon “Is It O.K.” 41). Pynchon, of course, knows firsthand the dangers of being considered “Insufficiently Serious,” having seen *Gravity’s Rainbow* recommended for the Pulitzer Prize, only to have the recommendation overruled. The possibility that their romances will be similarly dismissed has concerned many writers, and this concern helps explain the repeated use of singular points as framing devices in postmodern encyclopedic novels. These singular points paradoxically attempt to frame the novels as unframed in order to establish not their verisimilitude but their authenticity. Framing singular points provide another means of pre-emptively asserting the “latitude” Nathaniel Hawthorne claims in his preface to *The House of Seven Gables* (vii).

Seriousness for Pynchon is a function of a work’s “attitude towards death—how characters may act in its presence, or how they handle it when it isn’t so immediate” (Introduction SL xiii); Shelley, as Pynchon points out, faults herself on exactly this point. Looking back on *Frankenstein* in her introduction to the third edition (1831), Shelley writes, “I have affection for it, for it was the offspring of happy days, when death and grief were but words which found no true echo in my heart” (qtd. in Pynchon “Is It O.K.” 41; Shelley 173). The label of “Insufficiently Serious” allows the literary mainstream to dismiss entire genres—Pynchon cites romance and gothic novels, whodunits, science

fiction—in much the same way “those who, like C. P. Snow, have thought that in ‘Luddite’ they have discovered a way to call those with whom they disagree both politically reactionary and anti-capitalist at the same time” (“Is It O.K.” 40). Frye reacts in similar fashion when he argues against the summary dismissal of romance:

a great romancer should be examined in terms of the conventions he chose. William Morris should not be left on the side lines of prose fiction merely because the critic has not learned to take the romance form seriously. Nor, in view of what has been said about the revolutionary nature of the romance, should his choice of that form be regarded as an ‘escape’ from his social attitude. (305)

Walpole and Shelley both anticipate the tendency to dismiss the romance, to label it “Insufficiently Serious” or to respond naively, “But the world isn’t like that” (Pynchon “Is It O.K.” 41). As Pynchon notes, both authors originally published their works in “voices not their own” (“Is It O.K.” 40); Pynchon refers to the original prefaces of each work, Walpole’s written in “disguise” as the translator of an Italian manuscript (Walpole 7), Shelley’s by her husband, Percy. In both cases, the deception is part of an attempt to justify the “elements of faith” or of the miraculous found in their stories. By disclaiming authorship, each writer attempts to disclaim responsibility for the “fictional violations of the laws of nature” found in each work (Pynchon “Is It O.K.” 41); Walpole goes a step further and follows the practice of many early English novelists by suggesting in his preface, “Though the machinery is invention, and the names of actors imaginary, I cannot but believe that the groundwork of the story is founded on truth. The scene is undoubtedly laid in some real castle” (5). Walpole softens his claim, but it resembles the

claims to factuality found in the prefaces to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders* and on the title page of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, among many other early novels that, while not strict realism, do not portray supernatural events. By insisting on the reality of their fictions, each of these writers anticipates and seeks to avoid "the label 'escapist fare'" (Pynchon "Is It O.K." 41); Pynchon parodies this kind of condemnation in *Mason & Dixon*, when the attorney Ives LeSpark warns the young people in the audience that reading novels may at worst lead them to the madhouse and at best offer only "the meanest and shabbiest kinds of mental excitement" (351). In their attempts to justify and authorize their romances, Walpole and Shelley are responding to the demands of the Age of Reason and its Ives LeSparks and Hugh Blairs: demands for rationality and realism, for clear explanations of cause and effect, demands that, according to Pynchon, require human subordination to technology.

The question that Pynchon implicitly raises remains: why bother reading novels like *Frankenstein*, romances that ignore the laws of nature and reality? Pynchon offers one reason when he asks, "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?" ("Is It O.K." 40). The Badass's ability "to work mischief on a large scale" is the main expression of "Luddite value" in a novel and the primary way in which a novel may "*deny the machine*" (Pynchon "Is It O.K." 40). Pynchon groups the desire to "*deny the machine*" expressed by the original Luddites as well as later Luddite fiction with other movements that gained popularity during the Enlightenment, such as Methodism, the Great Awakening in America, Radicalism,

Freemasonry, and Gothic literature. Pynchon views these movements as forms of resistance to the dominant ideology of the time, each connected by the same “profound unwillingness to give up elements of faith, however ‘irrational,’ to an emerging technopolitical order that might or might not know what it [is] doing.” Furthermore, denying the machine is part of “the abiding human hunger for evidence of God and afterlife, for salvation—bodily resurrection, if possible” (Pynchon “Is It O.K.” 41). In the end, we read *Frankenstein* and other Luddite novels for the most sentimental reasons of all: these novels offer fictional worlds in which “the constraints of our own everyday world are routinely transcended” (Pynchon “Is It O.K.” 41) and thus express the hope that people might also transcend these constraints in the actual world; in doing so, however, they leave their authors open to charges of engaging in mere wish-fulfillment. The best of them escape the label of “Insufficiently Serious” through the authority with which their fictional worlds are constructed; the violations of natural law they contain are justified, which is to say that while not realistic or true, they are authentic. Walpole, for instance, goes to great lengths in claiming “to conduct the mortal agents in his drama according to the rules of probability; in short, to make them think, speak and act, as it might be supposed mere men and women would do in extraordinary positions” (8). Such romances offer evidence of the miraculous and reason for hope despite the reality around us.

The ability of romances that fit into Pynchon’s category of Luddite fiction “to insist on the miraculous” or “to deny the machine at least some of its claims on us” should not be confused with the original Ned Lud’s simple act of vandalizing a few stocking-frames (Pynchon “Is It O.K.” 41).¹⁴ Luddite anger, as expressed by the

Luddites themselves or by Luddite novels such as *Frankenstein*, is ultimately aimed not at any particular machine but at the larger system behind the machines; like Lewis Mumford, Pynchon “use[s] the term ‘the machine’ . . . as a shorthand reference to the entire technological complex” (*Technics* 12). By 1965, Mumford was capitalizing the M on machine (“Constancy” 162); Leo Marx cites Mumford’s formulation as typical of the evolving American attitude towards technology in the second half of the twentieth century (PP 200). In expressing this attitude, Mumford writes,

Most of the creative forces in our time have been canalized into the Machine, a systematic organization of scientific discovery and technological invention that, under the pressures of excessive pecuniary gains and exorbitant political power, has transformed the entire existence of the Western World. The insensate dynamism of this mechanical organization, with no goals but its own ceaseless expansion and inflation, has broken down the continuities of history. (Mumford “Constancy” 162)

While Pynchon makes similar use of this idea of “the Machine” in “Luddite,” in *Gravity’s Rainbow* he is critical of the over-simplification it represents and, in fact, his criticism is in keeping with the position Marx adopts in his essay “American Literary Culture and the Fatalistic View of Technology.” The “fatalistic view of technology” enters the novel most clearly through the epiphany that Enzian, the Schwarzkommando leader, experiences as he rides past an apparently bombed-out refinery. When he suddenly sees that the refinery has not been destroyed but “*reconfigured*” and “modified, precisely, *deliberately* by bombing,” Enzian realizes that “this War was never political at all” (Pynchon GR 520); instead, he concludes, the landscape immediately in front of him

and the war at large that it represents must be entirely technologically determined.

Enzian's vision, however, is soon revealed to be the "paranoid terror" of a character who has been ingesting amphetamines "like popcorn at the movies" (Pynchon GR 522); furthermore, the vision leads the narrator to imagine the other side of the argument against technological determinism:

Yes, but Technology only responds . . . 'All very well to talk about having a monster by the tail, but do you think we'd've had the Rocket if someone, some specific somebody with a name and a penis hadn't *wanted* to chuck a ton of Amatol 300 miles and blow up a block full of civilians? Go ahead, capitalize the T on technology, deify it if it'll make you feel less responsible—but it puts you in with the neutered, brother, in with the eunuchs [. . .]. (Pynchon GR 521)

Marx similarly, though somewhat less bombastically, calls attention to the tendency of technological determinism to obscure political realities: "To invest a disembodied entity like 'The Machine' or 'technology' with the power to determine events is a useful way to justify disengagement from the public realm and a reversion to inaction and privacy" (PP 207). Elsewhere, Marx specifically associates technological determinism with postmodernism (ITPP 237-58). In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon employs technological determinism as an updated version of the ideal continuity that frames human existence, replacing the theological and rationalistic traditions Foucault identifies and exemplified by Lewis's supernatural frame and Blair's chain of causation. Pynchon is at least implicitly aware of Marx's criticism; he clearly portrays the frame of technological determinism as a construction. In fact, its construction coincides with the breakdown of

the theological framework that Pynchon identifies with the displacement of the Age of Miracles by the Enlightenment.

As Pynchon makes clear, the stocking-frames that were the targets of the original Luddites had existed for over two centuries (Pynchon “Is It O.K.” 40). Particular stocking-frames or factories function as a synecdoche for the system of which they are a part, revealing “the concentration of capital that each machine represented, and [. . .] the ability of each machine to put a certain number of humans out of work—to be ‘worth’ that many human souls” (Pynchon “Is It O.K.” 40). With World War II, the continued development of this technopolitical machine led to “the Manhattan Project, the German long-range rocket program and the death camps” (Pynchon “Is It O.K.” 41). Having gone far beyond merely putting people out of work, the “product” of such a machine can only be human death on a massive scale. Still, Luddite resistance does not arise so much in response to “the potentially lethal machines and apparatus of technology,” but from the possibility Martin Heidegger identifies as the essential danger of technology—“that it could be denied to [man] to enter into a more original revealing and hence to experience the call of a more primal truth” (333). Whether the original Ned Lud had similar ideas in mind in 1779 is doubtful; regardless, the danger of what Heidegger calls the enframing (*Ge-stell*) nature of technology is at the heart of the machine that Luddite literature attempts to deny.¹⁵

Mere machines, whether they be stocking-frames, rockets, or computers, become part of “the Machine” that must be denied when technology achieves the authority of a law of nature. In Pynchon’s formulation, the primary way in which Luddite literature attempts to deny the machine is “to insist upon fictional violations of the laws of nature—

of space, time, thermodynamics, and the big one, mortality itself” (“Is It O.K.” 41). We appeal to the Badass—someone like Ned Lud, King Kong, or Frankenstein’s creature, who can destroy and thus resist the machine for us—when “we feel at the mercy of forces many times more powerful.” In Heidegger’s terms, when man can no longer envision himself in this role, he “comes to the point where he himself will have to be taken as standing-reserve [*Bestand*],” where standing-reserve is Heidegger’s term for “a stockpile of raw material” (Heidegger 332; Zimmerman 219). Marshall McLuhan, whose work Pynchon was familiar with by the time he was writing *Gravity’s Rainbow* (“To Thomas F. Hirsch” 240), describes the relationship between humans and technology at the middle of the twentieth century in a similar way: “By continuously embracing technologies, we relate ourselves to them as servomechanisms. That is why we must, to use them at all, serve these objects, these extensions of ourselves as gods or minor religions. . . . Man becomes, as it were, the sex organs of the machine world” (46). The ability of human beings to experience “god-like hours” or become “like a goddess of victory” that earlier writers had associated with singular points has been usurped by technology. In this atmosphere, only the comic book superheroes, science fiction characters, and other insufficiently serious figures like Pynchon’s Badass can achieve the authenticity represented by singular points.

Like Heidegger and McLuhan, Pynchon suggests that over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, technology has progressed geometrically to the point that it appears to have the force of a law of nature. Technology has replaced religion and history as the frame that dominates our perception of reality. “The amplifying of scale [and] the multiplying of effect” inherent in technological progress precludes human

beings from assuming the role of the Badass; enframing, the essence of technology, arrogates the role of Badass to the products of technology. In Pynchon's fiction, the foremost such product is the rocket. Reduced to the roles of "standing reserve" and "servomechanism," people become subservient to and dependent on technology.

Gravity's Rainbow, after all, is historically accurate in its depictions of the efforts of Allied forces at the end of the war to retrieve any and all rocket-related materials in the hopes of reproducing more and more rockets.

Technology as Law of Nature

The solidification of the laws of "space, time, thermodynamics, and the big one, mortality itself" during the Age of Reason led to a nostalgia for the Age of Miracles, when "the laws of nature had not been so strictly formulated" (Pynchon "Is It O.K." 40). Similarly, the amplification of the scale of technology and the multiplication of its effect in the early and mid-twentieth century led to a nostalgia for the Age of Reason: a time when the laws of nature seemed to apply to both people and machines and when man seemed to control—or at least understand—technology, rather than the other way around. By the twentieth century, writers seem less than troubled by the degeneration of "true working magic [. . .] into mere machinery" that Pynchon speculates was partly responsible for the broad resistance to the Age of Reason of which the original Luddites were symptomatic (Pynchon "Is It O.K." 41). The same cannot be said about the rise of machines into "minor religions" and the threat of man's fall into "standing-reserve" that McLuhan and Heidegger warn against. This development mockingly reverses the fall of magic into machinery that Pynchon observes in the movement from the Age of Miracles

to the Age of Reason and in so doing fulfills Arthur C. Clarke's observation that "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic" (39). But the means of dealing with the threat of technology in Luddite literature have also changed with the times. The believability of the Badass was a problem from the beginning; Walpole and Shelley, as noted, go to great lengths to authorize the presence of the supernatural in their works. Today, Badasses along the lines of Frankenstein's monster and Alfonso are relegated to comic books, another mode deemed "Insufficiently Serious" and one whose influence Pynchon displays in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Even more problematic for contemporary Luddites is the problem of "com[ing] up with any countercritter Bad and Big enough [. . .] to begin to compare with what would happen in a nuclear war" (Pynchon "Is It O.K." 41). While readers may suspend their disbelief long enough to accept that "living things, earthly and otherwise, may on occasion become Bad and Big enough to take part in transcendent doings," transcendence of nuclear annihilation—technology amplified and multiplied to its most lethal degree—is out of the question outside of comic books.

With the threat of nuclear war constantly in the background of much of the postmodern fiction of the 1960s and 70s in general and *Gravity's Rainbow* in particular, "we see the Luddite impulse to deny the machine taking a different direction" (Pynchon "Is It O.K." 41). Science fiction writers, a step above comic book writers, whom Pynchon identifies as the modern carriers of the Luddite tradition in literature, turn to "exotic cultural evolutions and social scenarios, paradoxes and games with space/time, [and] wild philosophical questions," devices that are also common in both postmodern fiction and Menippean satire ("Is It O.K." 41). Like their predecessors in Gothic fiction,

contemporary Luddite writers rely more and more on what Pynchon calls “literary means which are nocturnal and deal in disguise” in their attempts to deny the machine (Pynchon “Is It O.K.” 40). Pynchon is purposely ambiguous in citing these “nocturnal” techniques that “deal in disguise,” but such means are clearly part of the attempt to justify and validate the denial of the machine, the same attempt earlier Luddite writers made to authorize their “fictional violations of the laws of nature.” As technology grows beyond the control of individuals, convincingly portraying people who are capable of “mischief on a large scale” becomes more difficult to manage. With people at the mercy of the laws of nature and technology, the universe seems completely deterministic. “The abiding human hunger for evidence of God and afterlife, for salvation—bodily resurrection, if possible” or for the transcendence of “the constraints of our everyday world” becomes harder to satisfy in a serious context¹⁶; these very desires and the impossibility of having them fulfilled form the heart of Mason’s obsessions in *Mason & Dixon*. Rather than the “profound unwillingness to give up elements of faith” that characterized the original Luddites, a demand that early Luddite novels supplied, contemporary Luddite writers are more frequently faced with a complete lack of faith in the ability of living things to “take part in transcendent doings.” Sister Grace, Sister Edgar’s much younger companion, embodies this lack of faith in DeLillo’s *Underworld*. Despite her obvious religious devotion, Sister Grace is profoundly unwilling to admit even the possibility of something miraculous occurring in the South Bronx; she goes to see the billboard at the end of the novel only in order to accompany the elderly Sister Edgar.

The amplification of the forces that control the individual precludes the contemporary Luddite writer who wants to be taken seriously from presenting a Badass character who can transcend the effects of nuclear war. Instead, much more humble challenges must be addressed. In Pynchon's case, *Gravity's Rainbow*, a book which has nuclear annihilation constantly hanging in the background, lacks a Badass in the tradition of Frankenstein's creature or Alfonso the Good; however, Tyrone Slothrop, the closest thing to a traditional romantic quest hero in the novel, does exhibit some qualities of the Badass. The challenge to Slothrop, however, is not to wreak vengeance in the manner of the creature or Alfonso nor to overcome the forces of nature or perform miracles; instead, the challenge is to resist and escape the deterministic forces which shape him and in so doing to become a singularity, a site of discontinuity. In the zone, "the possibilities for Slothrop's freedom are put to the test" (Weisenburger GRC 149). As is typical in Menippean satire, Pynchon brings the question of man's place in the universe down to its most fundamental level: Slothrop's quest becomes an attempt to justify faith in free will in the face of deterministic forces that have grown to include even our own technological creations.

The machine that technology constructs, then, has grown from Ned Lud's original stocking-frames to the system of enframing that Heidegger identifies as "the essence of modern technology" (325) to include all the laws of "space, time, thermodynamics, and the big one, mortality itself." Folks in the twentieth century, or at least in Pynchon's twentieth-century novels, are in a position similar to that of "folks in the 18th century [who] believed that once upon a time all kinds of things had been possible which were no longer so. Giants, dragons, spells" ("Is It O.K." 40). Now what seems no longer

possible, however, is free will or even any control over our lives; belief in the growing inability to resist the enframing of technology results in the paranoia that saturates Pynchon's novels.

“[L]iterary means which are nocturnal and deal in disguise”

The tools Pynchon has at his disposal to authorize his readers' faith in free will and the possibility of establishing a relationship with the world outside the enframing of technology are the same ones he identifies in Shelley and Walpole: tools “which are nocturnal and deal in disguise” in order “to deny the machine.” Like the description of Victor Frankenstein's creation of the monster that serves as the primary example of the product of these tools, Pynchon “must, of course, be a little vague about the details” (“Is It O.K.” 40). However, these tools are evident, Pynchon argues, in Shelley's description, which mixes science with pseudo-science in order to authenticate the violation of the laws of nature convincingly (“Is it O.K.” 40); Pynchon parodically rewrites this type of scene on a number of occasions, as in his description of the Puncutron Machine in *Vineland* (163-65) and Dixon's electrocution by Franklin's Leyden Jar in *Mason & Dixon* (764-65). Mixing fact with fiction and science with magic helps to create the “disguise” the Luddite writer must use in order to justify the presence of the miraculous. The disguise in question is a matter of constructing an authority that will allow these novels, each involving impossible, even patently ridiculous events, to be taken seriously. The “nocturnal” origin of this authority is Pynchon's contribution to the series of code words that have been used to authenticate the miraculous: “‘Gothic’ became code for ‘medieval,’ and that has remained code for ‘miraculous,’ on through Pre-Raphaelites, turn-of-the-

century tarot cards, space opera in the pulps and comics, down to ‘Star Wars’ and contemporary tales of sword and sorcery” (“Luddite 41). Each of these code words represents an attempt to construct a framework in which the authenticity of miracles or singular points will be accepted.

Pynchon associates the use of assumed voices by both Shelley and Walpole with the creation of an authoritative disguise. While Pynchon does not disclaim authorship, Edward Mendelson argues that his avoidance of publicity results in semi-anonymous publication (GE 173); the Reverend Cherrycoke’s explanation of how he came to be on the frigate that carried Mason and Dixon to Cape Town after being imprisoned for committing “the Crime they styl’d ‘Anonymity’” sardonically illustrates the impossibility of truly anonymous publication. As the Reverend explains, “I left messages posted publicly, but did not sign them. [. . .] somehow, what I got into printing up, were Accounts of certain Crimes I had observ’d, committed by the Stronger against the Weaker [. . .] giving the Names of as many of the Perpetrators as I was sure of, yet keeping back what I foolishly imagin’d my own” (Pynchon M&D 9). Given his nearly complete avoidance of what Gérard Genette refers to as “paratexts,” Pynchon’s practice is quite different from that of Walpole and Shelley. Nearly all of Pynchon’s comments on his own writing come in his introduction to *Slow Learner*, and these comments are restricted to his short stories with the exception of a single derogatory allusion to *The Crying of Lot 49*. Allowing his novels to stand alone with no authorial commentary cultivates for them an alternative, subversive authority, the authority of anonymity, in contrast to the authority Shelley and Walpole seek to establish through disguised voices in their prefaces.

Pynchon makes extensive use of “voices not [his] own,” though in a different manner than Shelley and Walpole (“Is It O.K.” 40). By incorporating encyclopedic quantities of facts from various discourses, Pynchon disguises his own inventions in order to make believable the denial of the machine that he attempts in his work. Pynchon’s discussions of history and chemistry, to name just two discourses, are so well-grounded in fact that they make plausible the occasional violations of the laws of nature. The mixture of fact and fiction, science and magic continues throughout the novel, constantly blurring the lines between various binary oppositions. The culmination is a blurring of the line between reality and fantasy. The reality in question can be seen as both the fictive reality of the text as well as the factual reality the text is set against (the end of World War II and the events leading up to it). Blurring the line between fantasy and reality by convincingly mixing fact and fiction allows Pynchon to suggest that man can attain, if not the level of the mischief-causing Badass, perhaps at least some level of free will in the face of the technology that enframes him and reduces him to reproductive raw material.

Dreams: “Nocturnal” Singularities

Walpole and Shelley also establish authority for elements of the miraculous in their works through the “strikingly similar nocturnal origin” of both stories in “episodes of lucid dreaming” (Pynchon “Is It O.K.” 40). These dreams provide both writers with the creative spark that gives life to their Badasses; the nocturnal origin carries over into the novels most significantly for Pynchon in that while the processes involved may be electrical, surgical, chemical, and even alchemical, “The activating agencies [. . .] are

non-mechanical” (“Is It O.K.” 40). This is a particularly important point for Pynchon and goes against the grain of more common interpretations of the monster as the product of either technology run amok or of Frankenstein’s Faustian desires. Pynchon stresses the point in summarizing the necessarily vague description of the creation of the creature: “What is clear, though, despite the commonly depicted Bolt Through the Neck, is that neither the method nor the creature that results is mechanical” (“Is It O.K.” 40). While the creature may be a monster, he is not a machine. Dreams provide a familiar source for examples of human transcendence of the laws of nature; their “non-mechanical” nature opposes them to the enframing of technology. Furthermore, dreams provide Pynchon with a model for the historical discontinuities he foregrounds in his fiction.

Much of *Gravity’s Rainbow* originates in the nocturnal world of the characters’ dreams. Pynchon incorporates a digression centered on the best known example of “lucid dreaming” in the history of science, the dream of the ouroboros that led Friedrich August Kekulé von Stradonitz to identify the ring structure of the benzene molecule. The dream, while perhaps not the cause of a full-blown Kuhnian paradigm shift, did lead to the development of modern organic chemistry. The novel opens *in medias res*; Pirate Prentice’s dream provides the first example of a historical discontinuity: “A screaming comes across the sky. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now” (Pynchon GR 3). Though evocative of a World War II urban evacuation scene, it could as easily be a future nuclear war, and while Prentice is having the dream, it is not at all clear whether it is his dream or that of a client for whom he is serving as surrogate. Both Prentice’s and Kekulé’s dreams are the results of a convergence of the many historical forces acting on them, the “curves of research and development” in their personal and

professional lives, forces that come together to produce “amazing and unpredictable” results. At least, Pynchon writes in his introduction to an anthology of Donald Barthelme’s miscellanea, this is “what is supposed to go on in dreams [. . .] where images from the public domain are said [. . .] to combine in unique, private, with luck spiritually useful, ways” (Introduction TDB xvi). Pynchon commends Barthelme for his adept use of dream material, his ability to “smuggle [his] nocturnal contraband right on past the checkpoints of daylight ‘reality’” (Introduction TDB xvi). A writer’s ability to incorporate his or her dreams effectively, Pynchon writes, is like “taking something back inside the passage of time that otherwise might have continued on, suspended, exempt”—in other words, discontinuous, singular (Pynchon Introduction TDB xix).

Pynchon may or may not be using his own dreams as effectively as he would like; he laments his own shortcomings in this department when he complains that Barthelme is “there to make the rest of us look bad” (Introduction TDB xvi). What is clear, however, is that Pynchon takes advantage of the “nocturnal” origins of dreams as a means of Luddite resistance against the enframing of technology. Pynchon frames *Gravity’s Rainbow* with a dream at the beginning and the dreamlike uncertainty of the movie theater at the end, using the discontinuous nature of dreams to create historical singular points. These moments are characterized by the same mystery and transformative potential as the singular points discussed earlier; likewise, they mark points of local discontinuity. The first such moment, Prentice’s dream, is a nightmare vision in which historical forces have converged. As the narrator explains, “this is not a disentanglement from but a progressive *knotting into*” (Pynchon GR 3). The result of this convergence of forces is the apocalypse of the dreamscape, but in the process of producing this

apocalypse, the historical forces at work have been forgotten in Nietzsche's sense: "It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now." The last such moment, the conclusion of the novel inside a movie theater in the early 1970s, occurs before the Rocket has landed and offers the possibility of escape from the determinacy of the Rocket's fall. Together, these two singular points frame the events of the novel's present as a historical singularity on a massive scale.

Conclusion

Tyrone Slothrop fails the first test of the Badass: he is not "Big." However, Slothrop does possess qualities that enable him to "work mischief on a large scale" and by repeatedly reducing him to his erection, Pynchon gives him the impression of largeness. Initially, however, Slothrop seems completely the product of deterministic technological forces, "a perfect mechanism" (Pynchon GR 48). The subject of Pavlovian conditioning as a child, he is mysteriously linked to synthetic chemistry through Imipolex G and to modern technology through the rocket. Slothrop is certainly the servomechanism of his rocket; he is an almost literal example of man as "the sex organs of the machine world." The machine that Slothrop must deny in order to escape the enframing that determines him is seen most clearly in the rocket: an "amplified, multiplied, more than human opponent" that represents "the concentration of capital" and the ability of technology "to be 'worth' that many human souls" (Pynchon "Is It O.K." 40). In the case of the rocket, the conversion of souls into machines is a much more literal equation than Pynchon's example of the original Luddites losing their jobs due to the stocking-frame. The rocket represents the loss of human life on both ends of

its trajectory, in the slave-labor camps that produce it and in the neighborhoods upon which it falls. In the first section of the novel, Slothrop seems a part of this circuit; the success of Pointsman's attempts to determine the cause and effect relationship between Slothrop's erections and the fall of the rockets would result in proof of "the stone determinacy of everything, of every soul. There will be precious little room for any hope at all" (Pynchon GR 86). Thus, Slothrop's quest is another expression of the refusal to "give up elements of faith" that defines, for Pynchon, the "broad front of resistance to the Age of Reason" ("Is It O.K." 41). Maintaining faith in free will and in the existence of the soul ("Slothrop has been playing against the invisible House, perhaps after all for his soul" [Pynchon GR 205]) constitutes the ultimate denial of the machine. If the House always wins, then there is no escaping the enframing of technology.

"Where enframing reigns," Heidegger argues, "there is *danger* in the highest sense" (333). Paradoxically, "the essence of technology must [also] harbor in itself the growth of the saving power" (Heidegger 334). In *Gravity's Rainbow*, enframing reigns supreme wherever Slothrop is, particularly when he is at the Casino Hermann Goerring under constant surveillance and subject to Pointsman's experiments. Slothrop's foiling of these experiments and his escape to Nice result in a discontinuous moment: "the best feeling dusk in a foreign city can bring: just where the sky's light balances the electric lamplight in the street, just before the first star. Some promise of events without cause, surprises, a direction at right angles to every direction his life has been able to find up till now" (Pynchon GR 253). Slothrop recognizes the possibility of unpredictability by "holding always before [his] eyes the extreme danger" (Heidegger 338). Slothrop's "operational paranoia" (Pynchon GR 25) makes him hyper-sensitive to the enframing

forces of the machine that shapes his life and thus puts him in a position to deny the machine.

Slothrop's recognition of technological enframing allows him to recognize other frames as well. In fact, his epiphany on "the day he becomes a cross himself, a crossroads, a living intersection" refigures the direct contact with technological determinism he experienced as the infant victim of Jamf's experiments (Pynchon GR 625). As "he stands crying, not a thing in his head, just feeling natural," the enframing of technology is replaced by the natural framework that Slothrop to which feels directly connected for the first time. Slothrop becomes a singular point reminiscent of Emerson's description of becoming a transparent eye-ball. Slothrop experiences the same sense of connection to macrocosmic nature and the same annihilation of self that Emerson relates. Slothrop's loss of self, however, is also literal: "He is being broken down [. . .] and scattered" (Pynchon GR 738). Others experience this dispersal as an inability to "see Slothrop as any sort of integral creature any more" (Pynchon GR 740). Slothrop thus enacts in his fragmentation the fusion of outer macrocosm and inner microcosm that postmodern encyclopedic novels attempt to represent. However, the idea of Slothrop as the personification of microcosmic synecdoche is rejected by "a spokesman for the Counterforce" who reports that some members "felt that he was a genuine, point-for-point microcosm. The Microcosmists, as you must know from the standard histories, leaped off to an early start" (Pynchon GR 738). However, the view of Slothrop as microcosm necessarily reinforces the idea of a macrocosmic frame. Rather than representing a fusion of different frames of reference, he represents a breakdown of such frames altogether.

Slothrop's dispersal comprises an event of "irreducible singularity," to borrow a phrase that Jean Baudrillard uses to describe acts of terrorism (14). What happens to Slothrop is terrorizing in the immediate sense that Pig Bodine experiences it: "*But somebody's got to hold on [to Slothrop], it can't happen to all of us—no, that'd be too much*" (Pynchon GR 741). However, Slothrop's dissolution is terrorizing in quite another sense as well. The violation of novelistic norms it represents is only the tip of the iceberg. Any incorporation of Slothrop into some ideal continuity, whether this frame be theological, historical, or "microcosmic" in nature, is a refusal to recognize the "irreducible singularity" his disappearance represents.¹⁷ By resisting incorporation into any ideal continuity or macrocosmic frame, Slothrop incarnates the causeless effect that such totalizing systems cannot admit. This is precisely the kind of "mischief on a large scale" produced by both Pynchon's Badass and singular points in general.

The breakdown of frames that Slothrop himself signifies is figured through the structure of the novel as a whole. Like *Underworld*, *Gravity's Rainbow* constructs a narrative klein bottle, erasing the seams between the narrative frame and the contents of the frame. The novel is thus presented as an authentic, unframed singularity in the sense discussed in the previous chapter. The framed events are characterized by the radically undetermined authenticity derived from singular points. Disconnected from any ideal continuum of causation, each moment in time and space becomes a singular point itself. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, this singularity is represented through the simultaneity of events in Melquíades' manuscript, which "concentrated a century of daily episodes in such a way that they coexisted in one instant" (García Márquez 382). The events of *Gravity's Rainbow* are similarly figured as authentic due to their discontinuity from the

chain of historical causation. Each moment is a cusp that offers the possibility of discontinuity, as Pynchon indicates in his final instructions to the reader. Offering William Slothrop's preterite hymn, the narrator tells the reader, "Follow the bouncing ball" (Pynchon GR 760). The figure that the bouncing ball traces as it moves from syllable to syllable, a figure familiar from old movie house shorts and still occasionally seen in television commercials or children's programs, resembles the flight of a cannonball or rocket, like a series of parabolas strung together. But Pynchon's final visual image of mathematical singular points resembles even more closely a cycloid. The cycloid was seen earlier in the figure drawn by "trainwheels over the points," the shape formed by a fixed point on the edge of a circle "as the circle rolls upon a straight line" ("cycloid" 92). As each arc of the cycloid ends and the next begins, a cusp results; the image of a ball bouncing over the words of William Slothrop's hymn suggests that each syllable is a cusp, a singular moment during which anything is possible before the Rocket "reaches its last unmeasurable gap above the roof of this old theatre, the last delta-t" (Pynchon GR 760). The cusps, though "sung to a simple and pleasant air," are powerful moments, moments with the potential for apocalypse, like the rockets they evoke with their shape. In each of these moments lies the possibility to escape "the stone determinacy of everything, of every soul" (Pynchon GR 86).

Endnotes

1. This scene is the cause of complaint for reviewers and critics alike. Susan Strehle's reaction begins more positively than most when she describes Frenesi's reunion first with her mother and then with her daughter as "intense but almost wordless" before joining the critical mainstream: "She [Frenesi] has virtually nothing to say to either; she articulates no recognition or relief. She makes no evident contact with Zoyd, though Flash [her current husband] does. Small wonder the reviewers find Frenesi's return so anticlimactic: she has no light to bring to the novel's culminating events" (112). Joseph Tabbi finds little of value in the conclusion of "the central story of Prairie and Frenesi": "In the absence of the deferred apocalyptic moment, that story is even less compelling. A number of readers have expressed disappointment with the anticlimax of the last chapter, when, for the first time after some 350 pages of preparation, the mother and daughter finally meet. From the little we are told about it, Prairie seems to have felt more emotions in her sessions of watching Frenesi on film" (95-96).
2. The phrase "reduced to Certainty" becomes a leitmotif in *Mason & Dixon*. The protagonists first encounter the phrase in the "Letter of Reproach and Threat from the Royal Society" that they receive in answer to their own letter expressing concern over the safety of their mission following the attack on the *Seahorse* (Pynchon M&D 45). One line from the Letter of Reproach makes it into the Reverend's narrative, the line that most provokes Mason and Dixon: ". . . Whenever their circumstance, now uncertain and eventual, shall happen to be reduced to Certainty" (Pynchon M&D 45). Mason gives a close reading of the final phrase in the effort to identify the letter's author:

“As if . . . there were no single Destiny,” puzzles Mason, “but rather a choice among a great many possible ones, their number steadily diminishing each time a Choice be made, till at last ‘reduc’d,’ to the events that do happen to us, as we pass among ’em, thro’ Time unredeemable,—much as a Lens, indeed, may receive all the Light from some vast celestial Field of View, and reduce it to a single Point. Suggests an optical person,—your Mr. Bird, perhaps.” (Pynchon M&D 45)

The Reverend adopts Mason’s reading of the phrase and uses it in his attempts to explain the determining factors behind the shapes of the protagonists’ careers. Each use of the phrase describes the convergence of events to produce a turning point or historical cusp: the attack on the *Seahorse* (177), Mason and Dixon’s assignment to America (182), and finally the end of their mission in America: “Be they heedful or not, 1767 will be their last year upon the Line. Conditions hitherto shapeless are swiftly reduc’d to Certainty” (Pynchon M&D 636).

3. As Matthew Winston was the first to point out, William Slothrop and his *On Preterition* are modeled after Pynchon’s ancestor William Pynchon and his religious tract, *The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption*, which was in fact burned in Boston (254). On the role of the colonial Pynchons in both history, *The House of Seven Gables*, and *Gravity’s Rainbow*, see Deborah L. Madsen’s three recent essays.
4. Waste plays an important role throughout postmodern literature, from the contents of Brother and Sister Provo’s apartment that litter the sidewalk during their eviction in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* to the underground mail system (W.A.S.T.E) of Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* and the Zone of *Gravity’s Rainbow* to more recent manifestations

of the postmodern encyclopedic novel such as David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* and Don DeLillo's *Underworld*. Wallace's novel features a near-future United States (now a member of the Organization of North American Nations) in which much of New England has been forcibly ceded to Canada and designated a hazardous waste repository. Dumpster-like hazmat containers are launched into this "Great Concavity" from Massachusetts; giant fans blow the resulting airborne toxins to the north. Nick Shay, the most prominent character of DeLillo's *Underworld*, is an executive with Waste Containment who investigates the possibility of using a former Russian nuclear-test site in a plan to incinerate tons upon tons of hazardous materials with the no-longer-needed nuclear weapons. On waste in general, see LeClair, particularly his chapter on William Gaddis's *JR*; on waste in Pynchon, see Lawrence Wolfley, Tony Tanner (TP, especially 20-39), Terry Caesar, and Ron Jenkins.

5. The only substantive treatment of Foucault and Pynchon with respect to their approaches to history is Will McConnell's "Pynchon, Foucault, Power, and Strategies of Resistance"; McConnell calls the general lack of critical exploration of the relationships between the two "inexplicable, since Pynchon and Foucault occupy definitive roles in a diversity of writings widely acknowledged to constitute a postmodern sensibility" (152). As his title indicates, McConnell compares how the two writers depict modes of resisting power; Pynchon's frequent practice in *Gravity's Rainbow* of directly addressing the reader, McConnell argues, is part of an "incitement to self-consciousness" that "both makes the individuals' exercise of the circuit of power self-conscious and releases the repressed violence of the un- or subconscious privately" (164). Similarly, Foucault's "reading of gaps, silences and overlaps in the articulation of the structure of history. . . . is

an exercise of revolt that carries the potential for freedom” (165). Hanjo Berressem also treats Foucault briefly in his Lacanian analysis of *Vineland*, see 206-7; Michael Bérubé makes extensive use of Foucault’s concept of the “author function” in his dual analysis of Melvin Tolson and *Harlem Gallery: Book I, The Curator* and Pynchon and *Gravity’s Rainbow* (see especially 292-97, 300-308).

6. As Foucault explains at the conclusion of his essay, “In a sense, genealogy returns to the three modalities of history that Nietzsche recognized in 1874” (164). In returning to the monumental, antiquarian, and critical types of history that Nietzsche outlines in *The Use and Abuse of History*, genealogy inverts them.

7. The most lucid treatment of calculus in *Gravity’s Rainbow* remains Ozier’s early article, “The Calculus of Transformation: More Mathematical Imagery in *Gravity’s Rainbow*”; my own conception of Pynchon’s metaphorical use of singularities in *Gravity’s Rainbow* is indebted to both Ozier and N. Katherine Hayles.

8. Hayles’s analysis comes in her influential chapter on Pynchon in *The Cosmic Web: Scientific Field Models and Literary Strategies in the Twentieth Century*; for her treatment of singularities, see 189-197.

9. I would like to thank I. H. “Bud” Hart, professor of mathematics at the Oregon Institute of Technology, for helping me to understand the characteristics of singularities in mathematics. Any shortcomings in my understanding are a reflection of my own density.

10. Weisenburger argues that in the passage in question Pynchon is “borrowing key terms from *The Education of Henry Adams*,” specifically “continuity” and “cataclysm” (EH 150).

11. Ozier also identifies singularities with moments of change: “Common to all the mathematical images Pynchon has used—the Δt , the double integral, and now the singular point—is the idea of transformation from one world order into another or from one state of being into another” (Ozier 203). Ozier does not, however, extend the metaphorical condition of singularity to regions in space, characters like Slothrop, or objects like the rocket. For Ozier, the transformation that occurs at the moment of singularity is Rilkean in nature, “related to the transformation between life and death,” but offering the possibility of transcendence (202, 203). Ozier’s approach emphasizes the metaphysical significance of singularities, while my approach stresses their epistemological significance; Ozier does not consider the importance of physical, as opposed to metaphysical, transcendence associated with Pynchon’s Badass figures. My argument is meant to be complementary; Pynchon’s many moments of transformation suggest possibilities for both transcendence of the historical and apocalyptic change within history.

12. A gender-neutral version of the latter phrase returns in *Mason & Dixon* as the “Red Pubick Hair or R.P.H” that marks the margin for error in the surveyors’ measurements (Pynchon M&D 296).

13. Pynchon’s essay has not been treated extensively by critics. Those who do address it focus almost entirely on his comments on technology to the exclusion of his comments on fiction. Most critics also avoid Pynchon’s development of the concept of “the Badass.” Though he tends to oversimplify the novel, David Cowart provides a useful introduction to *Mason & Dixon* as a “773-page expansion of sentiments previously articulated in Pynchon’s 1984 article ‘Is It OK [*sic*] To Be a Luddite?’” (344).

14. On the scarce history and more plentiful legend behind the figure of Ned Lud (or Ludd), see Pynchon's former college friend Kirkpatrick Sale (77-79).

15. Earl and Joel Black both insist on Heidegger's relevance to Pynchon, particularly because of their shared attention to Rilke, though neither develops this connection.

Judith Chambers is the only critic to discuss Pynchon in a Heideggerian context at any length; she does not, however, treat Heidegger's approach to technology, focusing instead on Heidegger's hermeneutics. Heidegger's analysis of technology as essentially a mode of enframing reality in "The Question Concerning Technology" accords with Pynchon's discussion in "Is It O.K."; technology as enframing is even more relevant, however, in relation to the singular point framing devices Pynchon employs in both *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon* (as does DeLillo in *Underworld*).

16. That the issues of seriousness and the transcendence of "the constraints of our everyday world" are still sources of controversy is perhaps best demonstrated by the uproar three years ago over the nomination—and loss by only one vote—of J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* for the Whitbread Prize (Italie). The prize was awarded to another tale of swords and sorcery, Seamus Heaney's translation of *Beowulf*. Needless to say, *Beowulf* is perhaps the fountainhead of the Badass tradition in Anglo-American literature.

17. McHale provides the best demonstration of the shortcomings of attempts to naturalize the more fantastic elements of *Gravity's Rainbow* (CP 61-86).

Chapter 7

A Cosmology of Singularities: *Mason & Dixon*

As Brian McHale has demonstrated, postmodernist fiction frequently appropriates the device of the frame tale in order to create “Chinese-box worlds” (McHale PF 112) or what Steven Weisenburger refers to as “hyper-embedded” fictions (HEN 71); primary examples include Italo Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveler* or several of John Barth’s experimental stories in *Lost in the Funhouse*. What separates postmodern manifestations of the hyper-embedded frame tale from earlier examples such as *Wuthering Heights* and *Absalom, Absalom!* is the way in which they bombard the reader with the sheer frequency of the transitions between different diegetic levels. Furthermore, in making these transitions, postmodern works purposefully cultivate inconsistencies and paradoxes, producing “the effect of interrupting and complicating the ontological ‘horizon’ of the fiction, multiplying its worlds, and laying bare the process of world construction” (McHale PF 112). These effects are, of course, the very ones McHale identifies as the defining characteristics of postmodernist fiction, making the appropriation of the frame tale a key device of the style, particularly when exaggerated to the level of multiply-embedded narratives.

McHale cites the first and last pages of *Gravity’s Rainbow* as primary examples of how postmodern texts “tend to encourage *trompe-l’œil*” by “dup[ing] the reader into mistaking a representation at one narrative level for a representation at a lower or (more

typically) higher level” (PF 115, 114). In the case of the beginning of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Pynchon’s use of *trompe-l’œil* conforms to what Tom LeClair describes as the novel’s attempt to master its readers: readers are initially led to believe that the scene of evacuation is part of the primary diegetic world of the novel; as is generally the case, this mistake is revealed so that “deliberate ‘mystification’ is followed by ‘demystification’” (McHale PF 116). Pynchon outlines a similar process in describing the contemporary *zeitgeist* in 1984. In fact, he could as aptly be describing the devices that characterize postmodernist fiction, such as encyclopedism, *trompe-l’œil*, and metalepsis: “Since 1959 [when C.P. Snow delivered his Rede Lecture on “The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution”], we have come to live among flows of data more vast than anything the world has seen. Demystification is the order of our day, all the cats are jumping out of all the bags and even beginning to mingle” (“Is It O.K.” 1). Demystification is not always so simple, however, as is evident at the conclusion of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. The opening shift from dream to “reality” is easily assimilated since the world of the dream has only been developed slightly over the first two pages. In contrast, the jarring transition to a movie theater *circa* 1970 on the final page of *Gravity’s Rainbow* is something of a limit case in that, instead of providing the reader with a sense of demystification, the kind of “a-ha” feeling one has when recognizing “it was only a dream,” the shift to the theater is more mystifying than ever. In fact, it is almost unacceptable, if not completely unbelievable: “Can the reader really be expected to mentally reprocess the entire world, dropping it all down one level in his mind? Is it even possible for a reader to accomplish such a ‘re-vision,’ or has *trompe-l’œil* triumphed over demystification, for once?” (McHale PF 116). While the reader has presumably known all along that the book he or

she was reading is fictional, the prospect of dropping it down at “the last delta-t” from the level of fictional novel to that of fictional film-within-a-novel has caused many readers to balk (Pynchon GR 760). The beginning and the end of the novel are marked by sudden, unexpected movements from one distinct ontological level to another. In each case, what had previously seemed to be reality is revealed to be a fiction contained within a larger, seemingly real, framework

The two brief scenes that frame *Gravity's Rainbow* thus contribute significantly to the “foregrounding [of] ontological issues” that makes the novel “one of the paradigmatic texts of postmodernist writing” for McHale (PF 16). In addition, Pynchon’s use of *trompe-l’œil* contributes to his construction of narrative authority: to be so committed to mystifying the reader that demystification becomes impossible, as McHale suggests is the case in the final scene of *Gravity's Rainbow*, is to control and dominate the reader. As much as these scenes succeed in fooling the reader, however, to overemphasize the *trompe-l’œil* effect of these scenes is to ignore how they bracket the events of the rest of the novel as a singularity. The various plot lines intertwine in the Zone, itself a geographical singularity, and threaten an “amazing and unpredictable” convergence that will result in the historical analogue of an infinite discontinuity (Pynchon “Is It O.K.” 41). Nietzsche refers to this as a forgetting of the past or the “drawing of a limited horizon” (69; sec.X); in Heidegger’s terms it would be a leap outside the enframing of technology. For Pynchon, the convergence of historical and technological forces offers the possibility of catching “even the biggest of brass [. . .] flat-footed” (Pynchon “Is It O.K.” 41). McHale’s term, *trompe-l’œil*, is all the more fitting because in foregrounding this trick of moving unexpectedly from one ontological level to another, Pynchon allows

the reader to see how the trick is performed. However, in what amounts to a common confidence-man's maneuver, allowing the mark, or in this case the reader, to see one trick distracts from him another, usually more significant trick.

By requiring the reader almost immediately to perform, in McHale's somewhat awkward phrase, the retroactive deconcretization of the opening pages (CP 65-71), Pynchon represents more than just ontological discontinuity; in his own words, he uses the opening scene to "stash the merchandise, bamboozle the inspectors, and smuggle [his] nocturnal contraband right on past the checkpoints of daylight 'reality'" (TDB Intro xvi). The "contraband" in this case is his depiction of singularities in both the fictional world of the novel in general and the character of Slothrop in particular. His sleight of hand has another purpose; Edward Said suggests as a "general definition for any beginning that involves reversal, change of direction, the institution of a durable movement that increasingly engages our interest: such a beginning *authorizes*; it constitutes an authorization for what follows from it" (34). As discussed in the previous chapter, Pynchon uses dreams as one of the "literary means which are nocturnal and deal in disguise" to authorize his fictional worlds. The opening and closing scenes thus construct a frame of authenticity that encloses the bulk of the novel within singular points of technological and apocalyptic natures.

Pynchon foregrounds what McHale refers to as the "ontological issues" in the opening and closing scenes—that is, the fictional status of the events that took place at the preceding and subordinate diegetic level. By doing so, he effectively pre-empts any questioning of the authenticity of the novel's fictional world on ontological grounds, just as the encyclopedism of the novel attempts to pre-empt any criticism on epistemological

grounds. Pynchon essentially highlights the fictional status of the events that make up the world of the novel in order to secure their authenticity, like a confidence artist winning a gull's trust by revealing what Erving Goffman calls the "fabrication": "Observe that for those in on a deception, what is going on *is* fabrication; for those contained [taken in by the fabrication], what is going on is *what* is being fabricated. The rim of the frame is a construction, but only the fabricators so see it" (FA 84). The scenes that frame *Gravity's Rainbow* allow the readers to see the rim of the frame as a construction and thus invite them to accept the authenticity of the construction as one of "us, old fans who've always been at the movies (haven't we?)" (Pynchon GR 760).

One might wonder, however, whether there could there be a worse way of winning a reader's trust than telling her, after more than 750 pages, that it was all a dream or, in this case, a movie. After all, as McHale suggests, one can hardly "be expected to mentally reprocess the entire world, dropping it all down one level in his mind." The unreasonableness of this expectation is exactly the point. While "mystification" is perhaps one inevitable effect of the transition to the movie theater in the final scene of the novel, readers are certainly capable of assimilating this transition as easily as the one at the beginning of the novel—as McHale himself has done. On the other hand, readers need not assimilate the transition at all in order to get the point, which is not to confuse but to emphasize that though the events that make up nearly the entire novel ultimately occupy a secondary diegetic level, they are no less affecting as a result: rather, the final scene enacts what Linda Hutcheon describes as the "questioning of what 'real' can mean and how we can *know* it" that is at the heart of postmodernist fiction (APOP 223). If Pynchon has spent over 750 pages only to say at the end that it was all a dream or, what

amounts to the same thing, a movie, then what he has pointedly not said is that it was all *just* a dream.

Embedded Narrative in *Mason & Dixon*

The extensive effects of embedding that McHale observes in *Gravity's Rainbow* are present in *Mason & Dixon*, though they are not foregrounded to the same degree. In fact, at first glance, Pynchon's use of embedded narratives in *Mason & Dixon* appears quite different from his method in *Gravity's Rainbow*, due in large part to the fact that the novel begins at the primary diegetic level—the outer frame—and from there drops down only to secondary and tertiary levels of diegesis. That the contrast between the two seems so sharp is due at least in part to the success of McHale's account of postmodernist fiction. This account leads one to expect something much along the lines of what is found in *Gravity's Rainbow*: if not *trompe-l'œil*, then another device that disorients the reader and foregrounds the ontological instability of the fictional world(s) being constructed. However, while the use of embedded narratives in both *Gravity's Rainbow* in particular and postmodernist fiction in general “has the effect of disorienting the reader and undermining the ontological status of the primary diegesis” (McHale PF 117), such is not the case in *Mason & Dixon*, nor is the ontological status of the secondary diegesis (i.e., the hypodiegesis: the Reverend's tale) seriously subverted despite the fantastic nature of many of the events that occur within it. This is not to say that many of the same postmodernist devices are not present in *Mason & Dixon*. Pynchon uses both *trompe-l'œil* and metalepsis, for instance, in the interpolated captivity narrative (chapters 53-55). Though select parts of the hypodiegesis remain doubtful, Pynchon does not challenge the

ontological stability of the hypodiegesis as a whole as he does in the final scene of *Gravity's Rainbow*; instead, the Reverend presents the hypodiegesis as a history of the world of the diegesis.¹ The novel opens rather tamely at the level of the primary diegesis with the extended LeSpark family gathering to hear a tale from their uncle, the Reverend Wicks Cherrycoke. In *Mason & Dixon*, Pynchon's frame-tale structure reinforces the ontological stability of the primary diegesis and buttresses the at times unstable foundation of the world of the Reverend's narrative to the extent that the Reverend succeeds in convincing his audience that his narrative is a history of the world of the primary diegesis.

Given this beginning, *Mason & Dixon* appears at first to fall squarely under McHale's description of modernist, rather than postmodernist, fiction since it is characterized by an epistemological dominant (PF 6-11). In traditional examples of modernist and realist novels that construct Chinese-box worlds, McHale argues, "each narrative level function[s] as a link in a chain of narrative transmission. Here recursive structure serves as a tool for exploring issues of narrative authority, reliability and unreliability, the circulation of knowledge, and so forth" (McHale 113). The ideal implicit in McHale's conception of traditional hyper-embedded novels, particularly as seen in their realist and modernist forms, bears a close resemblance to Hugh Blair's ideal version of history, in which "we should be able to trace all the secret links of the chain, which binds together remote, and seemingly unconnected events" (395; lect. 35). I do not wish to argue, however, that *Mason & Dixon* should not be considered an example of postmodernist writing. On the contrary, it is clear that while the beginning of the novel is "fairly conventional," as Bernard Duyfhuizen notes, "some 770 pages later we would all

have to agree that Pynchon has turned classic frame narrative on its ear” (134). Despite foregrounding the epistemological foundations of its construction, Pynchon’s novel differs from traditional frame narratives—and histories—in its construction as “not a Chain of single Links, for one broken Link could lose us All,—rather, a great disorderly Tangle of Lines” (Pynchon M&D 349).

Further distinguishing the scenes that frame *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon* is the lack of any of the events that typified the singular points described in the previous chapters: neither miracles in the traditional sense nor modern wonders of a technological nature are present in the opening and closing episodes. In both *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Underworld*, the opening frame scenes involve the threat of technological apocalypse; in other similarly framed postmodern encyclopedic novels such as *Midnight’s Children* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, miracles take the place of apocalyptic moments. In each example, however, the events are focused into a single moment of significance: “When it comes” in GR (Pynchon GR 4); the moment of Thomson’s home run, fused with Hoover’s thoughts of the detonation of an atomic weapon by the USSR; the moment of Saleem Sinai’s birth at the exact stroke of midnight as India becomes independent; the moment in which Colonel Aureliano Buendía “remembers that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice” as he stands before the firing squad (García Márquez 11). While Pynchon’s use of the Transit of Venus within the hypodiegesis of *Mason & Dixon* functions similarly, the framing narrative none of the ostentatious singular point events familiar from other postmodern encyclopedic novels. Instead of moments of convergence that suggest the possibility of apocalypse, Pynchon represents the opening and the closing scenes of the primary

diegesis as moments of lamination that insist upon the continuity of the primary and secondary narratives. The Transit of Venus provides Pynchon's most important model for these moments of lamination during which the invisible can be made visible.

The Transit of Venus

Within the overall frame, the Reverend's story of Mason and Dixon and their career together is itself framed by observations of the Transit of Venus, an astronomical event occurring in pairs a little over every hundred years, in which the planet Venus moves across the disk of the sun as seen from Earth.² The transits of 1761 and 1769 were among the major scientific events of their day: "Months before [the Transit of 1761 was due to occur] the governments of France, Denmark, Sweden, Russia, and Great Britain organized scientific expeditions to various parts of Europe, Asia, and Africa to observe the event. The Royal Society initiated its plans a full year before the expected transit" (Cope AYMD 169). The buildup to the final preparations had actually been over forty years in the making, dating back to Edmund Halley's advertisement of the importance of obtaining as many observations as possible in the 1716 volume of the Royal Society's *Philosophical Transactions* (Cope AYMD 169). In the end, "Observations were reported by 176 observers from 117 stations" (Cope CMJD 542). The Transit of 1761 also provided the original occasion for the partnership between Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon that is the subject of Pynchon's novel. The many teams of astronomers sent around the globe to observe the transit attempted to record as accurately as possible the exact time at which each side of the planetary disk began and ended its passage across the sun. By then comparing the different results from different latitudes, astronomers hoped

to be able to determine the precise value of the solar parallax, the size of the angle subtended by the Earth as seen from the Sun. An accurate measure of the solar parallax would allow astronomers to calculate more precisely than ever before the distance from the Earth to the Sun, thus giving them a confident grasp of the size of the solar system.³

In the spring of 1761, Pynchon's characters Mason and Dixon, like their historical counterparts, arrive in Cape Town in South Africa to observe the first Transit. The two astronomers and the Transit itself become a *cause célèbre*; across the ocean in the American colonies, the Transit enters into the popular culture in various ways. Later in the novel, George and Martha Washington recall a sailors' song, a pudding, even a wig inspired by the Transit (Pynchon M&D 283). The Transit enters into people's everyday lives in a way that other more monotonous observational activities of the times, many of them centered around solving the problem of the longitude, do not. However, the knowledge hoped for from the Transit, unlike the many efforts directed toward finding a practical method for determining one's longitude at sea, has no immediate economic or military application; as Dixon wonders after the two have returned to England, the "Transit made no Market sense, whatso-fairly-ever. . . ?" (Pynchon M&D 248).

In addition to the effect it has on society at large, the rapidly approaching Transit looms ever larger in the lives of the astronomers who will observe it. Mason and Dixon have risked their lives and left their families to travel halfway around the globe to observe an event lasting less than three hours, an event that could be obscured by a single wayward cloud.⁶ Mason, the trained astronomer of the pair, first describes the spectacular opportunity provided by the Transit to Dixon as a moment when ghosts might materialize—"the moment the Planet herself becomes Solid. . . ." (Pynchon M&D 75).

He later explains even more passionately to the Vroom sisters and their slave Austra that “For Astronomers, who usually work at night, ’twill give us a chance to be up in the Day-time. Thro’ our whole gazing-lives, Venus has been a tiny Dot of Light, going through phases like the Moon, ever against the black face of Eternity. But on the day of this Transit, all shall suddenly reverse,—a Goddess descended from light to Matter” (Pynchon M&D 92). For Mason, as Venus passes in front of the sun and moves out of the flat, two-dimensional firmament into the living, three-dimensional world, the planet becomes incarnate, moving from ideal to real in a process that might be called historical integration. Mason’s use of “descended,” however, should not be read as negative. What has always been for Mason an unknowable, ungraspable abstraction reveals itself as “Matter,” and thus part of his mortal frame of existence. From Mason’s point of view, the symbolic significance of the Transit is twofold: first, if Venus can “descend [. . .] from light to matter,” then it may be possible for Rebekah, his late wife, to do the same (and, in fact, she does appear to him not too long afterwards on St. Helena); second, if this type of descent is possible, then the reverse, transcendence, must be possible as well: thus, Mason can join Rebekah when his time comes.

Recording the second Transit eight years later, this time on his own in rural Ireland, Mason observes the planet passing behind a cloud during the Transit and writes, “There she is, full, spherickal . . . the last time I shall see her as a Material Being . . . when next appearing, she will have resum’d her Deity” (Pynchon M&D 719). Mason’s comments form an exceedingly personal interpretation of the meaning of the Transit, colored by his melancholy, his gothic imagination, his desperation for any sign of the supernatural, his desire for reunion with his dead wife; after the first Transit, he accuses

himself of “loading an unreasonable weight of Hope upon that Mission, upon the Purity of the Event” (Pynchon M&D 247). For Dixon, though the event is less a reflection of his own obsessions, it still represents a merging of the transcendent and the mundane: “*This*, Dixon understands, is what Galileo was risking so much for,—this majestick Dawn Heresy. ‘Twas seeing not only our Creator about his work,’ he tells Mason later, ‘but Newton and Kepler, too, confirm’d in theirs. The Arrival, perfectly as calculated, the three bodies sliding into a single Line . . . Eeh, it put me in a Daze for fair’” (Pynchon M&D 98). For the Royal Society, sponsors of this observational expedition and major architects of the worldwide undertaking of which it is a part, the Transit’s significance lies in its symbolic value as a victory of the Age of Reason and of man’s ability to map not just the Pennsylvania-Maryland border, not just the Earth, but the universe itself, making the mission an attempt at mastery and control of the natural world. The Reverend likewise sees the Transit as symbolically meaningful, but reads in its infrequency a moral: “Eight more years till the next, and for this Generation last, Opportunity [to observe the Transit of Venus],—as if the Creation’s Dark Engineer had purposely arrang’d the Intervals thus, to provoke a certain Instruction, upon the limits to human grandeur impos’d by Mortality” (Pynchon M&D 97). Despite the Transit’s multivalent symbolic values, each interpretation hinges on its singular nature: its infrequency defines it as meaningful.

In addition to its function as a device for framing Mason and Dixon’s career, the Transit is the most prominent astronomical event in a novel preoccupied with astronomy. In fact, it is one of several examples of heavenly objects becoming newly visible. The fixed stars provide the background of the heavens, the map against which the movement

of other bodies may be gauged. They appear motionless with regard to each other as they revolve around the night sky, always following the same patterns, night after night. Motion in the heavens is judged relative to the static background of the fixed stars. But with the exceptions of the moon, planets, and comets visible to the naked eye, seeing any movement against this background, much less correctly defining it, requires extreme vigilance, attention, and luck. Such was the case in the discovery of the “new” planet Uranus, identified by William Herschel in 1781, five years prior to the events of the novel’s primary diegesis. The Reverend describes the surprising nature of the discovery: “Suddenly the family of Planets had a new member, tho’ previously observ’d by Bradley, Halley, Flamsteed, Le Monnier, the Chinese, the Arabs, everyone it seem’d, yet attended to by none of them. ’Twas impossible to find an Astronomer in the Kingdom who was not wandering about in that epoch beaming like a Booby over the unforeseen enlargement of his realm of study” (Pynchon M&D 769). Though these observers had seen Uranus, they had not recognized it as a planet. Herschel himself at first believed that he had discovered either “a curious either Nebulous Star or perhaps a Comet” (qtd. in Hoskin 171-73). Upon his next observation, the movement of the object relative to the nearby known stars convinced him it was a comet (Hetherington 25); subsequent observations of the apparently increasing diameter of the object further convinced Herschel he had discovered a comet that “was rapidly approaching the Earth” (Hoskin 174). In fact, Uranus was at the time moving away from earth (Hetherington 26). Herschel’s records of his observations provide a case study in how expectations can taint empirical observations (Hetherington 23-35).

When a heavenly object becomes newly visible, visibility does not guarantee that observers will recognize what they are looking at; often they will see what they want or expect to see, a lesson as valid in objective sciences such as astronomy as it is in all other areas of life. Mason describes a difficulty in observing comets similar to the problems of recognizing Uranus as a planet: “These Apparitions in the Sky, we never observe but in Motion,—gone in seconds, and if they return, we do not see them. Once safely part of the night sky, they may hang there at their Pleasure [. . .]. keeping perfectly upon Station, mimicking any faint, unnam’d Star you please” (Pynchon M&D 726). To see these objects for what they are requires an event comparable to the passage of Venus in front of the sun: an event that makes them stand out from the background against which they are all but invisible, a momentary illumination to provide contrast to what Mason describes as “the black face of Eternity.”

Examples of astronomical epiphanies, such as Herschel’s recognition of Uranus and Mason and Dixon’s observations of the Transits, demonstrate the central role human observation plays in a scientific understanding of the universe. For Mason, Venus becomes solid and real only when he finally observes it against the sun. Likewise, Uranus is “discovered” only when it is finally identified as a planet, despite the fact that it had been observed there in the night sky before. However, the detailed incorporation of science in the novel, of which the Transit observations are the most vivid examples, is not an end in itself. As in his earlier works, Pynchon uses science as a source for metaphors that illuminate his treatment of history. The narrator of the primary diegesis makes the connection between astronomy and history clear from the beginning when he explains, “[T]he Times are as impossible to calculate, this Advent, as the Distance to a Star”

(Pynchon M&D 6). The opening frame introduces Mason and Dixon's expedition to observe the first Transit, the purpose of which, after all, was to determine the distance to the sun, thus indicating the connection between the astronomers' observations and the Reverend's. The transformations from two-dimensional abstraction to three-dimensional reality and from invisible to visible provide real-world examples of a process that soon becomes the focus of the Reverend's tale.

The Mobility

The historical concern in *Mason & Dixon* rests largely with those who have been passed over by history. The Tristero in *The Crying of Lot 49*, the Preterite from *Gravity's Rainbow*, and the various elements of the counter-culture in *Vineland* have become, in *Mason & Dixon*, the Mobility. While the idea of the Mobility takes on a great deal more significance in his most recent novel, it is not new to Pynchon's fiction; as early as *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon uses it to describe the fusion of the Slothrop family to American national destiny: "Shit, money, and the Word, the three American truths, powering the American mobility, claimed the Slothrops, clasped them for good to the country's fate" (28). In *Vineland*, this "American mobility" has evolved into a more distinct concept; it is now capitalized and associated specifically with automobile-centered American culture. After his treatment on the Puncutron Machine, Takeshi drives his new partner, DL, away from the Kunoichi Retreat, "back down, along the mud ruts to the paved country roads, down to the arterial, to the on-ramp to the Interstate, till she was all the way back inside the Mobility" (Pynchon VL 166). Pynchon returns to a similar image in his liner notes to the 1994 anthology *Spiked! The Music of Spike Jones*.

Imagining Jones's "film biography,"⁵ Pynchon sees the story culminating with Jones "more and more wised up until the last we see of him he's out there like the Flying Dutchman on the great urban ultimate—the freeway, cruising nowhere special, reluctant to come to any rest or closure, out there among the mobility." The connection of the Mobility to the open road carries over into *Mason & Dixon*, with adjustments for the pre-automotive setting, but Pynchon develops the concept in important ways.

"Mobility," as Pynchon employs the term in *Mason & Dixon*, has its origins in the Latin phrase *mobile vulgus*, "the movable or excitable crowd," by way of "mobile" and "mob" and in ironic contrast to nobility ("mob," "mobility"). Early in the novel, Pynchon employs the term in much the same way as in his earlier works. In this case, however, the "determin'd Rush of Footfalls" on a city street replaces the white noise of traffic "speeding down the freeway" (Pynchon M&D 214; VL 166), and "Odd Screams" break the monotony of the sounds rather than the "car horns and screeching brakes" that make up the "vehicular unpleasantness, the soul of the City" (Pynchon M&D 166; Liner Notes *Spiked!*). In addition, the Mobility is still somehow fundamentally an American phenomenon, even when the scene described takes place in a surreal red-light district of London. Mason, out on the town with Mun and Nevil Maskelyne as well as the French astronomer J. J. Lalande, sees "silent Crowds of hastening men and women" and then feels

the firmness of the Mobility's Grip upon them, once they have entered the Current. Soon he [Mun Maskelyne] has vanished, leaving Mason to find his way back, tho' by now 'tis unclear if, thro' an Agency yet to be discover'd, he has not already, Wig and Waistcoat, been not so much

transported as translated, to a congruent Street somewhere in America.

(Pynchon M&D 214)

Later uses of the term span a variety of contexts in which it is applied to diverse and sometimes mutually exclusive groups of people. The tones associated with the term likewise span the spectrum from disparaging and dismissive to nostalgic and inclusive, resigned and disgusted to accepting, tolerant, even respectful.

Including the example mentioned above, there are fourteen direct references to the Mobility. The various contexts for the other instances are as follows: in the first discussion of the Lost Eleven Days, the narrator explains that “the Mobility” consider Macclesfield’s appointment to the Presidency of the Royal Society “a shameless political reward [. . .] for his Theft of the People’s Time” (Pynchon M&D 192-3); Franklin refers to his political opposition as the “Presbyterian Mobility” (266); the Veery Brothers, Philadelphian effigy makers, explaining the attention to detail they take in their work, tell Mason that “our Mobility like to feel they’re burning *something*, don’t you see?” (Pynchon M&D 289); the Reverend describes the political enemies of the Line Commissioners as “a Mobility of Rent-payers” (Pynchon M&D 292); the Stamp Act Crisis brings with it “Whiteboys and Black Boys, Paxton Boys and Sailor Boys,—a threat of Mobility ever present” (Pynchon M&D 353); Mason groans, “God help this Mobility,” in decrying the willingness of people, from “the Parisian *Haute Monde*” to the rural axmen carving out the Line, “to take all Projectors upon Trust” (Pynchon M&D 449); the Reverend, speculating on public fascination with “the Great Thieves of Whitehall,” includes himself and the rest of the Line party when he suggests that “What we of the Mobility love to watch, is any of the Great Motrices, Greed, Lust, Revenge” on a grand

scale (Pynchon M&D 451); Timothy Tox excludes himself and the patrons of the Rabbi of Prague when he explains disparagingly that to “the Mobility, he [Franklin] is the Ancestor of Miracle,—or, of Wonders, which pass as well with them” (Pynchon M&D 488); Mason wistfully recalls the protests of weavers from his childhood producing “the great, crisp, serene Roar,—of a Mobility focus’d upon a just purpose” (Pynchon M&D 502); the Reverend again applies the term to those rebelling against the Stamp Act (Pynchon M&D 570); Stig the ax-man describes his arrival in Philadelphia “among the hectic Mobility at Dock-Side” (Pynchon M&D 612); Mason accuses Dixon of wanting to bring the Golem along on the Line because he desires “the Neighborhood of Prodigy,—the Mobility Awe-struck,—Entry to Saloons [he] ha[s] previously been unwelcome in” (Pynchon M&D 685). The references to the Mobility culminate in the final chapter when “all unchosen Philadelphia” enters the room where the Reverend has been narrating his tale, bringing with them “their proud fellowship in a Mobility that is to be” (Pynchon M&D 759).⁶

For the most part, “Mobility” seems to refer to groups that occupy a position between the Preterite and the Counterforce of *Gravity’s Rainbow*: dispossessed, often uninformed, and largely powerless, like the Preterite, but also capable of striking against those in power, as when they chase the “Province’s Stamp Distributor” out of Maryland (Pynchon M&D 570). Occasionally, the Mobility are idealized, as in Mason’s memory of the rioting weavers of his youth, who, like a car on the open highway, created “a Murmur,—ever, unceasingly, the great, crisp, serene Roar,—of a Mobility focus’d upon a just purpose” (Pynchon M&D 502). More often than not, however, “Mobility” carries with it a negative connotation, as when the Paxton Boys produce the “threat of Mobility

ever present” (Pynchon M&D 353). Different speakers use the term subjectively, in different situations including themselves among the Mobility or not, implying both negative and positive connotations. What remains constant in each instance, regardless of what group is being referred to, is that there are no definitively identifiable individuals in the Mobility, only crowds—“Rent-payers,” “Whiteboys and Black Boys, Paxton Boys and Sailor Boys,” “back Inhabitants,” Presbyterians, the heterogeneous groups of vendors, stevedores, servants, thieves, and others along the dockside or in the streets (Pynchon M&D 292, 353, 309). These groups, like Mason’s “Apparitions in the Sky,” are always in motion, in flux, ever present but never visible for long, if at all.

The Mobility consist of those people who are simply faceless members of the crowd—people who have little control over their own destinies, who have no say in what goes on in the world or even in their own lives. However, even among the Mobility a hierarchy exists, and at the very bottom of the social pyramid are most frequently, though not exclusively, slaves. Slaves possess all of the disadvantages of the Mobility without the freedom of movement that is the primary advantage. Mason and Dixon travel to South Africa and America, both slave colonies, and become familiar with the horrific conditions of slavery first hand in Cape Town as they prepare for the Transit of Venus. Unlike anything either had seen in Britain, even in the repression of the Scottish clans and culture of Dixon’s youth and the weavers of Mason’s hometown, the curse of slavery haunts the Dutch colony. The Reverend describes the situation in Cape Town: “But here is a Collective Ghost of more than household Scale,—the Wrongs committed Daily against the Slaves, petty and grave ones alike, going unrecorded, charm’d invisible to history, invisible yet possessing Mass, and Velocity, able not only to rattle Chains but to

break them as well” (Pynchon M&D 68). “Charm’d invisible to history”—thus, the Reverend identifies the defining characteristic of the Mobility: historical invisibility, an invisibility that encompasses not only the wrongs committed against the slaves, but also the slaves themselves and the Mobility in general. The chains that bind them are, of course, literal but they also include the figurative chains of a history that keeps them invisible. The members of the Mobility are there to be controlled and used for profit, not to be seen, not to think for themselves, nor even to be remembered, though despite their invisibility, they are ever present—in South Africa, in the American colonies, in India, in Ireland, in each setting the novel touches.

The astronomers find the situation in America even worse than in Cape Town. In January, 1765, during the winter break from their surveying duties, Mason and Dixon visit the site of a massacre of Indians at Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Already, this event, just over a year distant, like the wrongs done to the slaves in South Africa, has been “charm’d invisible to history” by the citizens’ unwillingness to acknowledge any wrongdoing on their part. At the jail where the Indians died, Mason smells “Lethe-Water,” later explaining to Dixon, “One of the things the newly-born forget, is how terrible its Taste, and Smell. In Time, these People [Americans] are able to forget ev’rything. Be willing but to wait a little, and ye may gull them again and again, however ye wish,—even unto their own Dissolution. In America, as I apprehend, Time is the true River that runs ’round Hell” (Pynchon M&D 346). Later, on his return from a trip south to Williamsburg, Dixon has a similar epiphany as he waits “for some kind of sense to be made of what has otherwise been a pointless Trip” (Pynchon M&D 397). He finally realizes, “In all Virginia, tho’ Slaves pass’d before his Sight, he saw none. That

was what had not occur'd. It was all about something else, not Calverts, Jesuits, Penns, nor Chinese" (Pynchon M&D 398). The Reverend extends this observation to the treatment of Indians in India by the British East India Company, telling his family, "Street upon desperate Street, till the smoke of the pyres takes it all into the Invisible, yet, invisible, doth it go on. All of which greatly suiteth the Company, and to whatever Share it has negotiated, His Majesty's Government as well" (Pynchon M&D 153).

The Mobility's condition of invisibility extends across the map that the Reverend's narrative traces, which is largely the map of late eighteenth century British imperialism; on this map, the Mobility form the largely overlooked background against which history plays out, analogous to the background of fixed stars upon which the momentous events of eighteenth century planetary astronomy occur. "The black face of eternity" that Mason must contend with in his observations of the heavens thus represents the black face of mortality that writers or readers of history must contend with if they hope to make visible the faceless and unnumbered people who live and die but leave no mark.

Mobile Invisibility

The Mobility are defined by their invisibility. In addition to its accepted etymology, the novel hints at an alternative derivation of the term as a contraction of "Mobile Invisibility," a phrase Dixon first hears in a tavern called the Rabbi of Prague far along the line toward the Allegheny Mountains. The topic of conversation among the tavern's regulars concerns a giant Golem said to reside in the area, apparently set loose by an Indian tribe "widely suppos'd to be one of the famous Lost Tribes of Israel" (Pynchon M&D 485). The Indians gave "up control of the Creature, sending it headlong

into the Forest, where it would learn of its own gift of Mobile Invisibility” (Pynchon M&D 485). Understandably doubtful of the Golem story, Dixon attempts to grasp it by way of analogy to a topic more familiar to him. He asks the company in the bar, “I am told of certain Stars, in the Chinese system of Astrology, which are invisible so long as they keep moving, only being seen, when they pause. Might thy Golem share this Property?” (Pynchon M&D 486). Dixon’s analogy to Chinese Astrology provides an important clue to understanding the parallel between the treatment of science and the treatment of history in the novel; the tavern regulars approve of Dixon’s analogy and immediately begin explaining their Kabbalistic theories concerning America and the ways in which the Golem’s property of Mobile Invisibility is “shar’d with this whole accursèd Continent” (Pynchon M&D 486). The figure of the Golem thus links the Mobile Invisibility of astronomy with that of history: the Golem possesses the same quality of Mobile Invisibility as Venus, Uranus, comets, stars in Chinese astrology, and so on; the Golem is the creation and protector of the oppressed and shares with them the quality of Mobile Invisibility or, more simply, Mobility. As Timothy Tox explains to Dixon, “Here as in Prague, the Golem takes a dim view of Oppression, and is ever available to exert itself to the Contrary” (Pynchon M&D 490). Furthermore, the linkage is explicitly connected with America by one of the Kabbalists in the tavern: “All matters of what becomes Visible, and when. Revelation exists as a Fact,—and continues, as Time proceeds. If new continents may become visible, why not Planets, sir, as Planets are in your Line?” (Pynchon M&D 487).⁷ For the Kabbalists, the invisible is particularly susceptible to being made visible in the new world since the continent itself had only

recently been revealed after centuries of being “*kept hidden*, as are certain Bodies of Knowledge” (Pynchon M&D 487).

Though he has seen it all of his observing life, Venus becomes “Solid” and real for Mason only when it makes its long waited for transit in front of the sun; Uranus, though it had passed before the eyes of many men and had not been recognized, like the slaves Dixon fails to recognize in Virginia, joins the family of planets only when it stands out against the background in Herschel’s view of the sky. Of course, Venus, Uranus, and the other objects the novel’s characters follow in the sky had been real and had been there all along, only no one was looking for them in the right place or at the right time or perhaps in the right way. Likewise, the people who make up the Mobility are real and ever-present. They possess, as the Reverend explains, “Mass, and Velocity,” despite the fact that they may have been “charm’d invisible to history.” As the movement of heavenly bodies from invisibility to visibility is possible in the science of astronomy, the Reverend’s observations of the Mobility suggest that under the proper conditions, the same is possible for previously unnoticed people and events in history. In fact, bodies becoming visible in astronomy is the whole point—this is when discoveries are made, how new knowledge is found, why years of preparation and the best technology of the time go into preparing for the Transit of Venus. Equally important in the Reverend’s historical observations are those perhaps even more uncommon moments when the Mobility pass into historical visibility, when they are metaphorically illuminated by history’s sun, either through an observer seeing them newly, differently, or through a rare temporary change of conditions. The astronomers witness precisely such a moment in Cape Town when slaves become visible to the whites of the colony; Dixon experiences a

similar moment again when he visits the site of the Lancaster massacre. These moments of epiphany and incarnation, when an observer witnesses an object moving from two to three dimensions or from invisibility to visibility, have evolved from the apocalyptic moments of possibility seen in *Gravity's Rainbow* and represent the historical singular points of *Mason & Dixon*. Rather than offering the possibility of an apocalyptic, frame-breaking moment, these points illuminate the edges of the historical frame and suggest the possibility of escape from this constraining structure.

Conclusion

The 1761 Transit of Venus is the prototypical historical singular point in *Mason & Dixon*. The Transit creates the cultural and historical conditions that allow the Mobility to become historically visible in Cape Town. As mentioned earlier, it enters into the popular consciousness of the American colonies, inspiring songs and fashions as well as an interest in astronomy; something similar happens when the astronomers are in Cape Town. The Zeemans and Vrooms, with whom the astronomers are lodging and eating, respectively, “speed about in unaccustom’d Bustle”; Cornelius Vroom “is up on the Roof, scanning the Mists with a Nautical Spy-Glass, reporting upon hopeful winds and bright patches” (Pynchon M&D 97). Even the Vroom daughters become so caught up in the event that they find time not only to observe the Transit but also to make “their own Darkening-Lenses” in preparation (Pynchon M&D 99).

The Transit creates more than just a momentary fad for astronomy, however; afterwards, the Colony changes—as though everyone conforms to the Reverend’s description of Dixon and “becomes as a Sinner converted” (Pynchon M&D 98). The

months after the Transit move by as quickly and as free of sexual intrigues and manipulations as the months before had been slow and full of them. The Transit acts as a kind of communal climax after which “Astronomers and Hosts walk about for Days in deep Stupor, like Rakes and Doxies after some great Catastrophe of the Passions” (Pynchon M&D 99). Having captured the passions of the Dutch, the Transit leaves a vacuum in their lives when it is over so that they temporarily reform. Mason and Dixon observe that the Mobility briefly and unexpectedly enter the public consciousness and conscience to fill this vacuum in the life of the colony:

All over Town, Impulse, chasten'd, increasingly defers to Stolidity. Visiting Indian Mystics go into Trances they once believ'd mindless enough, which here prove Ridottoes of Excess, beside the purpos'd Rainy-day Inanition of the Dutch. The Slaves, as if to preserve a secret Invariance, grow more visible and distinct, their Voices stronger, and their Musick more pervasive, as if the Rain were carrying these from distant parts of Town. (Pynchon M&D 99)

The astronomers observe this transition with nearly the same quiet astonishment that they had observed the Transit. Mason wonders, “[H]ad the Town undergone some abrupt Conversion?” (Pynchon M&D 100). Dixon explicitly connects “this turning of Soul” to the Transit of Venus and observes its effects in fewer beatings for slaves and even guilty, fearful behavior in masters; he speculates that the cause is “the Working of the Spirit, within” (Pynchon M&D 100, 101). The change in the people of the colony comes as suddenly as the change in the appearance of Venus before the sun and proves to be as dramatic; while it lasts longer than the few hours of the Transit, however, in the end it

proves as fleeting. As the Reverend explains, “Little by little, as weeks pass, the turn of Spirit Mason and Dixon imagine they have witness’d is reclaim’d by the Colony, and by whatever haunts it. Any fear that things might ever change is abated” (Pynchon M&D 101). The white slave owners of course have little incentive to pursue this “turn of Spirit” and a great many practical, economic reasons to continue repressing their awareness of the wrongs committed against the slaves and their own guilt in committing these wrongs.

The change in the colony passes just as the Transit passes; the opportunity offered by this historical singular point proves to be a cusp rather than a discontinuity. The colony goes back to normal and the slaves slide back into invisibility, but neither the Transit nor the visibility of the slaves goes unnoticed by the observers. Optimistically, opportunities do exist for the Mobility as well as the historians who seek to make them visible. As the self-appointed historian of Mason and Dixon, the Reverend plays a historical role analogous to their astronomical roles. In explaining the Transit to the Vroom daughters and Austra, Mason sums up the point of the worldwide efforts: “One day, someone sitting in a room will succeed in reducing all the Observations, from all ’round the World, to a simple number of Seconds, and tenths of a Second, of Arc,—and that will be the Parallax” (Pynchon M&D 93). The Reverend performs the historical equivalent of Mason’s prediction in narrating his tale; recalling that “the Times are as hard to calculate, this Advent, as the Distance to a Star,” just as the solar parallax will enable astronomers to determine the distance to the sun, so perhaps the Reverend’s reductions of his observations from around the world will provide him with a key to “the Times.”

Endnotes

1. See chapters three and four above.
2. “Venus transits occur in a regular cycle of 4 during a period of 246 years; the last one occurred on 6th December 1882 and the next will occur on 8th June 2004” (Weigert and Zimmerman 277). The last four Transits of Venus were in early June in 1761 and 1769 and early December in 1874 and 1882; the next four will occur in early June in 2004 and 2012 and early December in 2117 and 2125 (Illingworth 393).
3. As Nevil Maskelyne points out in his report to the Royal Society, once “that curious and nice element in astronomy, the sun’s parallax” was known, astronomers would be able to “thence determine the true distance of all the planets from the sun, and from each other” (199, 199-200). By virtue of Kepler’s Third Law of Planetary Motion, “If only *one* absolute distance within the solar system is known, all other distances between the earth and sun can be found and stated in absolute units” (Weigert and Zimmerman 277).
4. The Transit began before sunrise as seen from Cape Town, so that Mason and Dixon could not observe the first contact with the sun’s disk; from the time when they spotted the planet until the final external contact, just over two hours and twenty minutes elapsed. Clouds did threaten their observations; as Pynchon quotes from their report in *Philosophical Transactions*, “The sun ascended in a thick haze, and immediately entered a dark haze” (M&D 98; cf. Mason 383). Clouds all but ruined Maskelyne’s observations of the Transit from St. Helena, preventing him from recording times for either internal or external points of contact (198). In the novel, Maskelyne complains to Mason about this (Pynchon 131-32).

5. In his introduction to *The Teachings of Don B.*, Pynchon similarly imagines a movie version of Barthelme's life: "All things, in any event, will be set right when the biopic or *Donald Barthelme Story* is aired at last. This will be a made-for-cable-TV miniseries starring Barthelme lookalike Luke Perry in the title role" (TDB Intro xxi). And in his liner notes for Lotion's album *Nobody's Cool*, Pynchon pictures the band's career as the "dream of an endless cruise" filtered through the lens of the television show *Love Boat*. Pynchon's fondness for filtering the careers of artists through the lenses of film and television provides anecdotal support for the importance of generic conventions as a shaping influence on his fiction.

6. In addition to these examples, there are several occurrences of "Mob" in similar contexts; see 196, 290, 428, 503, 570, 737.

7. Although I treat this scene seriously and I think it usefully sheds light on much of the rest of the novel, its humor cannot and should not be overlooked. The opinions expressed about America are of course paranoid conspiracy theories; what makes the scene even funnier are the sources of these opinions. The occupants of the Rabbi of Prague seem to owe as many of their qualities to Saturday morning cartoons as to frontier Pennsylvania. They first greet Dixon with Mr. Spock's Vulcan greeting from *Star Trek*. Most obvious among the patrons is one who resembles Popeye: "a somehow nautical-looking Individ. with gigantick Fore-Arms, and one Eye ever a-Squint from the Smoke of his Pipe" (Pynchon M&D 486); also present is Yosemite Sam in the guise of "a short red-headed woodsman in Deerskins, who is holding a tankard in one hand and a Lancaster County rifle in the other" (Pynchon M&D 486); the speech of the Landlord is even faintly

reminiscent of Foghorn Leghorn: “If, I say ‘if,’ you do see it [the Golem . . .] you’ll then talk of Wonders indeed” (Pynchon M&D 485).

Responding to similar tendencies in Pynchon’s earlier work, Edward Mendelson argues that “Pynchon’s own buffoonery, the puns and pie-throwing that occur whenever matters threaten to become too serious, is a way of insisting that *Gravity’s Rainbow* not be confused, even locally, with the world it illuminates” (GE 183). Mendelson here seems to miss a point he goes to great lengths demonstrating: the encyclopedic nature of Pynchon’s writing insists that it should be confused with the world it illuminates. This insistence is even more evident in *Mason & Dixon*, which lacks the jarring effects of *trompe-l’œil* employed at the beginning and conclusion of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. The difficulty in dealing with Pynchon’s sophomoric humor results from the tension between these competing urges. Perhaps a better way of accounting for “the puns and pie-throwing” is to see it as part of the encyclopedic narrative’s “encyclopedia of narrative, incorporating, but never limited to, the conventions of heroic epic, quest romance, symbolist poem . . .” (Mendelson GE 163). To this list, Pynchon adds the conventions of vaudeville, silent films, slapstick, chase scenes, and so on. Rather than distancing the text from reality, this inclusion can be read as an attempt to embrace every possible form of representing reality. Thus, no single convention is privileged.

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