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# Revolutionary Possibilities: Anarchist Philosophy and Its Influence on the Work of Thomas Pynchon

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The College of Wooster

Revolutionary Possibilities: Anarchist Philosophy and Its Influence  
on the Work of Thomas Pynchon

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Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements of Independent Study

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March, 2020

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## Introduction

When I first began to read Pynchon, I was immediately struck by two things. First, I was amazed by the formal inventiveness he displayed even in his debut novel, *V.*, whose fragmented narrative structure and labyrinthine prose style caught my attention from the very beginning. Even though I was already somewhat familiar with other postmodernist literature, *V.* blew away any expectations I had going into it and by the time I reached the fifty-page mark I'd already resolved to read everything else Pynchon had published. As I kept reading *V.* I also began to notice Pynchon's political content, which would become my second major point of interest in his work. Though he rarely stated his politics overtly, I began to pick up on subtle political threads in the novel, such as a sharp critique of post-World War II American culture, the articulation of a growing disillusionment with capitalism, and the merciless ridicule of authoritarian figures in our society. Along with these critiques came a few brief mentions of anarchism, which struck me as quite odd, not only because it is a system of philosophy that rarely appears in literature due to its rather marginal status in mainstream political culture, but also because Pynchon actually seemed to understand what it was. On the rare occasions when anarchy is invoked in literature, it is used almost invariably to connote violence, disorder, chaos, or any other kind of social ill the writer wishes it to stand in for. Not so for Pynchon. He does not use this culturally imposed definition of anarchism in his work, instead seeming to draw directly from the long tradition of anarchist political theory, a conjecture helped along by the fact that he frequently

references specific anarchist theorists, which signals an understanding of the philosophy that goes beyond the surface level. Due to this trend in Pynchon's early work I became very conscious of any mention of anarchism in his novels, and as I moved through his bibliography I found more and more evidence that his work had some kind of connection to the philosophical system that went far beyond mere curiosity.

As I moved through his early bibliography, Pynchon's relationship with anarchism began to become more clear. In his second novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*, he references the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin several times, as well as displaying other more subtle nods to anarchism, such as the anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian critiques of American society that were present in *V*. Though *The Crying of Lot 49* is quite a short novel, it does just as much as *V*. to develop Pynchon's political stance and begins to articulate some of the ideals that would be a constant over the rest of his career. By the time I reached *Gravity's Rainbow*, I was already convinced of the connection between Pynchon's work and anarchist theory, but his third novel contained a treatment of anarchism that went far beyond the scope of his previous two books and entirely solidified my thoughts about Pynchon's political project. *Gravity's Rainbow* takes the anarchist threads running through *V*. and *The Crying of Lot 49* and expands upon them, including a variety of anarchist characters and plotlines that explore the potential of revolution, as well as articulating a far more wide-ranging critique of capital and authority than he did in either of his previous novels. With *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon puts forth both a critique of the way things stand and a commentary on the necessity for revolutionary action in the face of an unjust system, although this last point

is made somewhat more ambiguous by the novel's underlying cynicism and doubt.

Despite these lingering questions, *Gravity's Rainbow* is a text committed to revolution in both the literary and political sense, and contains the most fully-formed articulation of anarchist ideals presented in Pynchon's early career.

As I began to read Pynchon's later work, I noticed that anarchism had taken something of a back seat again, at least when compared to *Gravity's Rainbow*. His first two novels after a seventeen-year hiatus, *Vineland* and *Mason & Dixon*, contain relatively few explicit references to anarchism, returning to the vague treatment of the political system found in his first novel, *V*. Despite their lack of specific references to radical thinkers, these two novels nonetheless carry on the distinctly anarchist themes of anti-authoritarianism and the critique of capital that have run through all of Pynchon's work up to this point, giving them a sense of political continuity with the rest of his bibliography, even though they are not as explicit about their politics. These novels are focused more on themes like history and family, and though they are both intimately concerned with the political realm (especially *Vineland*), Pynchon seems to have decided to put off a full discussion of anarchism for the time being. At this point in his post-hiatus career Pynchon seems not to have formulated a new conception of anarchism, so it retreats to a thematic level where it informs the politics of his novels but does not take on an entirely central role. However, when I read his subsequent novel *Against the Day* I started to find more references to anarchism than ever before. Even more so than *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Against the Day* takes anarchist philosophy and presents it as a central theme, going far beyond the subtle allusions and vague treatment

it had received in his other recent work. By the time I finished reading *Against the Day* there was little doubt left in my mind about Pynchon's radical tendencies, as that novel is so clearly indebted to the tradition of anarchist theory that the influence becomes impossible to ignore even for someone reading it outside of an academic context, as I was at the time. This development in his writing and the more clear articulation of his political ideals again sparked my interest in the topic of Pynchon and anarchism and led me to reevaluate some of his earlier work in light of the political content he puts forth in *Against the Day*.

As I became more interested in this specific aspect of Pynchon, I began to look for biographical information about him, previous scholarship, anything that could help to further elaborate upon this connection I was picking up on in his work. I quickly realized that looking for a comment about anarchism from Pynchon himself was a dead end, as in his many decades as a relatively high-profile author, he has never once given an interview or even had his photo taken, leaving his work as the only means left with which to extrapolate his political beliefs. Once this more personal option had been taken off the table, I turned to secondary literature to search for answers about Pynchon and anarchism, thinking that a trend that was so apparent to me must have had a great deal of scholarship written about it. However, I fared little better on this front, given that much of the scholarly literature surrounding Pynchon's work is concerned with his formal innovations, or the religious themes of his work, or simply tries to make sense of his dense writing. My only lead came from an anthology of essays about *Against the Day*, where a scholar named Graham Benton published a piece analyzing Pynchon's

treatment of anarchism in that novel, as well as briefly connecting it to the political dimension of several of Pynchon's other works. Though this was helpful, the lack of any other substantial research dealing with the topic of anarchism in Pynchon's work struck me as strange and halted any further study into the matter for the time being. This relative lack of scholarship increased my interest even more and ultimately led me to want to look into the topic in a more in-depth, academic manner.

Pynchon's exploration of anarchism over the course of his career was something of a literary anomaly in several different ways. First, as touched on above, anarchism occupies a very marginal place in contemporary politics, as it is generally thought of as a relic of the nineteenth century, if it is thought of at all. Its only adherents in the modern era are a relatively small number of highly ideological people who lack the numbers or the power to exert their influence on the mainstream political sphere, and as a result it is usually relegated to a mere historical curiosity. However, Pynchon takes the ideas of anarchism seriously in his work, not using it as a pejorative attack or critiquing it as a failed ideology, but taking its tenets to heart and using them to build out the political philosophy he presents in his work. He employs anarchist critiques of the state, capitalism, and social hierarchies in every one of his novels, from *V.* to *Bleeding Edge*, with the resulting body of work being one committed to revolutionary ideals and the hope of overthrowing the current system in favor of a new, better, and more just social order.

All of this still begs the question of why Pynchon would put an ideology generally seen as outmoded by the mainstream in a position of such thematic centrality. His

treatment of anarchism goes beyond the level of casual curiosity and becomes one of the major structural elements of his oeuvre, his work taking on aspects of both a literary and a political project. By placing anarchism in this position within his work, Pynchon rejects the notion that it is an outdated ideology suited only to the past time of open war between unions and strike busters, no longer applicable to our era at all. Instead, Pynchon uses his novels to advocate for a kind of neo-anarchism, an ideology updated for our time, dealing with contemporary economic concerns and developments in culture unforeseen by the originators of anarchist philosophy. Pynchon takes the basics of anarchist theory and twists them to fit the shape of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, using them to attack the social ills he sees eating away at humanity, such as the all-powerful state, unchecked and profit hungry corporate capitalism, and the vast networks of unjust power that bind the two together and allow them to project their influence over all of society. As will be shown, Pynchon uses his novels to take these centuries-old political ideals and reframe them, using anarchist theories in order to critique the state of the world as it stands today and to inspire his readership to revolution against the powers that control them.

## Chapter One

### Anarchism: Its Ways and Means

Over the course of its history, anarchism has always taken on a dual meaning. In mainstream political thought it has been used as a pejorative, a shorthand easily understood to mean lawlessness, disorder, mayhem, and violence. If a politician, or an economist, or a novelist wants to easily dismiss an idea they need say nothing more than “It would mean anarchy”. It is understood that this is a societal ill to be avoided at all costs, a dangerous political movement consisting of violent and deranged individuals who would like nothing more than to create a world where might makes right and antisocial behavior is the new rule of law. However, to initiate anarchy represents something altogether different. Anarchists think of themselves as proponents of peace, liberty, and equality, working together to bring about the end of unjust hierarchies, capitalism, and the state, three forms of oppression which they see as inextricably linked to one another and incapable of being dismantled separately without simultaneously addressing the others. In order to better understand the way Pynchon uses these ideas in his work, this chapter will seek to elucidate the political aims and revolutionary means of anarchism, as well as explore some of the key differences and divisions that exist under the umbrella of anarchist philosophy.

As a rule, all anarchists stand in opposition to the state, capitalism, and the unjust or unequal application of authority, though there exist deviations from this basic

formula that will be expounded upon later. Of these three, the one that tends to attract the most confusion and concern is the anarchist's staunch opposition to the existence of a state apparatus. In our Western liberal democracies this position is nearly tantamount to heresy, as it calls into question the very foundations of our society and attacks the status quo that we have so often been told is the natural state of things. Anarchists look at the state as envisioned by liberal philosophers such as Hobbes and Locke and see just another weapon to be wielded against the working class by the bourgeoisie, and even beyond that, a facilitator of unjust hierarchy that cannot be salvaged even through the implementation of socialism, a key difference from other left-wing traditions like Marxism-Leninism. For anarchists, the state exists only to facilitate the oppression of the majority by the minority, and uses measures such as unjust laws and a monopoly on violence in order to keep its population submissive and totally under its control.

As alluded to above, anarchism has a distinctly antagonistic attitude towards the liberal democratic nation-state as envisioned by enlightenment figures, its critique of which shares much in common with other systems of revolutionary philosophy like Marxism. Anarchists hold the liberal nation-state to be nothing more than a collaborator in the exploitation and alienation of the working classes, acting in conjunction with the forces of capital in order to entrench the supremacy of private property and reinforce the status quo of exploitative class relations in capitalist society. In fact, many anarchists go so far as to say the sole purpose of a capitalist state is to maintain the material conditions that enable the exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie. In her essay *Anarchy: What It Really Stands For*, Emma Goldman writes that the state "is necessary

*only* to maintain or protect property and monopoly. It has proven efficient in that function only,” (Goldman, 12) . Anarchists reject the liberal state as nothing but a facilitator of capitalist exploitation, as they hold that human beings are perfectly capable of organizing society without the interference of an authoritarian body to police them and protect the exploitative forces of capital. Many anarchists also reject the liberal state on the grounds that it relies on the threat or actual use of violence in order to sustain its legitimacy. They maintain that any political apparatus that uses a monopoly on force to subordinate the individual through the promise of retribution is illegitimate, and any law, social custom, or religious doctrine that serves to reinforce this unjust and unequal state of things is equally illegitimate and oppressive. Though there are countless other anarchist objections to the liberal state, its role in the maintenance of capitalist class relations and its commitment to the oppression and subjugation of individual expression are the two most trenchant anarchist critiques of the liberal democracy as it exists today in the West.

Though they share nearly identical critiques of the state as it exists under capitalism, anarchists depart rather sharply from authoritarian communist traditions such as Marxism-Leninism when it comes to the issue of the socialist state. In *The State and Revolution*, Vladimir Lenin outlines his conception of the role of the state in a revolutionary society, coming to the conclusion that it must be used as a tool to stamp out the influence of the bourgeoisie and firmly establish the supremacy of the proletariat, before it can be allowed to crumble away in order for a truly classless and equal society to emerge. Here, the state is used as a stop-gap, a necessary step in the

revolutionary process that acts as a facilitator for the transition from the barbarism of capitalism to the dream of a purely Marxist society. In this tradition, the state is seen as an indispensable weapon to combat the forces of reaction that will inevitably spring up in the wake of a successful revolution, and as a way to safeguard the democratic will of the people until the conditions for true communism have at last been brought about. Due to this vision of the state's role in revolution, adherents to the Marxist-Leninist tradition take Marx's idea of "the dictatorship of the proletariat" rather literally, and use it as the basis of their case for the legitimacy and necessity of the socialist state as the primary means to perpetuate the existence of a revolutionary society.

Anarchists, predictably, take a dim view of authoritarian communism's vision of the revolutionary state. Their critique continues to concern itself with authoritarianism, saying that the communist state is nothing more than a transferral of power from one kind of ruling class to another, except this time the tyranny will be disguised by the language of radical freedom and equality. Anarchism holds that the state, if it is allowed a continued existence, will forever seek only to consolidate its own power at the expense of the liberty of its people, even if it is created with the intent to facilitate the eventual existence of a free and equal society. Therefore, anarchists see the socialist state as just a continuation of oppressive governmental rule, an inherently authoritarian structure that will be unable to move past "the dictatorship of the proletariat" to its stated goal of a truly classless society and stay just that, a dictatorship administered by a new form of authority.

Instead, anarchism seeks to totally abolish the state apparatus in the course of a revolution, thereby removing the conditions for oppression by a centralized governing body. Most strains of anarchist thought hold that in order to fully end the suffering of the masses, all forms of oppression must be dismantled simultaneously in order to prevent a new authoritarian structure from simply taking the place of the old one. Taking this view of the issue, anarchists call for the abolition of capitalism, the state, and all unjust hierarchies in general simultaneously, the result of which will be to create a society absent of oppression where every person is free to realize their full potential. The main objection to this revolutionary model from pro-state leftists is that it is just not realistic, that a centralized authority or a vanguard party of some kind is necessary to direct the revolutionary will of the people, as well as to protect the revolution from outside influence and reactionary violence. However, the anarchist reply is to say that humans are capable of acting rationally in their own self interest, and in a revolutionary scenario that self interest will lead them to band together with their communities in order to organize things like defense, allocation of food, work, and a communal code of ethics, all without the need for an authoritarian body to keep watch over them. These differences in left-wing traditions come down largely to disagreements in strategy for a successful revolution as well as basic assumptions about human nature, the anarchist view on which will be expanded upon shortly.

Being a political ideology that attracts a large number of free-spirited and individually minded people, it is no surprise that anarchism does not possess one central orthodoxy and is instead subdivided into groups and thinkers who share similar

political and ideological priorities. However, in the interest of brevity, these groups can largely be sorted into two distinct categories, those being individualist anarchism and collectivist anarchism. The individualists mainly draw from the ideological well of Max Stirner, a German philosopher who was an active participant in the Young Hegelian movement and published his major work *The Ego and Its Own* in 1845. In this book Stirner lays out his argument for “egoist anarchism”, an ideology that venerates the individual and the drives of its ego, placing it above the societal collective. He asserts that all rational individuals will always act out of their own self-interest, and thus will seek to bring about the end of their oppression by authoritarian structures such as the state and the capitalist mode of production. Once this post-state, post-capitalist world has been brought into being, Stirner advocates for a “union of egoists”, a voluntary and non-hierarchical organization formed by individuals out of their own mutual self-interest and acting in place of a state or other governmental body. Stirner viewed this contract between individuals as necessary because, like Hobbes, his view of human nature is an essentially combative one, though he comes to the opposite conclusions of that earlier theorist. Instead of seeking to create an all-powerful leviathan to curb the base impulses of humanity, Stirner sees this violent competition between egos as an inherent good and desires that the state be abolished so that this conflict can be fully borne out. However, he also recognizes that existing in a state of constant fear and war is not in the long term interest of the rational individual, which is why his proposed solution takes the form of the union of egoists as a way for individuals to come together in order to serve their distinct self-interests while also retaining their autonomy.

Stirner's other major contribution to the history of anarchist thought is his writing on "spooks", ideas and structures like the state, property, and natural rights that have been placed in the minds of the masses by the forces that dominate society in order to better control the populace. These ideas presage writings by Marx and Engels on ideology, as well as the theories of contemporary philosophers like Slavoj Žižek, and remain a cogent critique of ideological superstructures even if many of the rest of Stirner's ideas may seem rather outmoded and essentialist.

It must also be said that individualist anarchism contains within it several right-wing deviations from the majority of anarchist thought, most notably anarcho-capitalism. By deemphasizing the necessity of the collective, individualist strains of the anarchist tradition open themselves to cooptation by the right, who see this radical version of individualism as almost a continuation of the liberal tradition that first began to emphasize the role of the individual in society. These right-wing anarchists take cues from both the egoism of Stirner and the ideology of free-market capitalism, essentially positioning themselves as a more extreme permutation of American libertarianism. They venerate the invisible hand of the market above all else, and as such wish to get rid of the state and any power it may hold over economic matters, hence their adoption of the term "anarchist" in order to signify their opposition to the existence of the state in this regulatory capacity. Anarcho-capitalists hold that by removing the state from the economic equation, commerce will be allowed to flourish without impediment and riches will be available to any who can rise through the ranks of the meritocracy. However, this line of thought takes a rather selective approach to

defining anarchism. Right-wing anarchists clearly stand in opposition to the state, yet the term “anarchism” denotes much more than simply this one position. It also includes a stand against exploitation, oppression, and hierarchy even outside of the state apparatus, all three of which would be preserved or even strengthened in an individualist, stateless society of pure free-marketteering. Because of this inherent contradiction, it must be questioned how deeply right-wing anarchists understand their own professed ideology, but due to the prevalence of anarcho-capitalist rhetoric over the last several decades their influence and ideas should be addressed all the same.

The second, and more relevant, category of anarchy is communalist anarchism. This was the form championed by most of the prominent liberatory thinkers of the nineteenth century, including the first to call himself an anarchist, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, as well as many of his most famous successors such as Mikhail Bakunin and Pyotr Kropotkin. Though they still hold the individual in high regard, communalists do not place so heavy an emphasis on its supremacy over society, instead choosing to advocate for a synthesis between individual and collective that would be to the benefit of all, in place of a Stirnerian competition between egos. The way Proudhon envisioned this synthesis was through an economic and social system he termed “mutualism”. This was an idea akin to an early form of market socialism, which sees self-employed and autonomous artisans and laborers creating goods which are then to be bartered on the market based on their relative value. Though Proudhon’s conception of how this value would be assigned is somewhat nebulous, his idea hews closest to Marx’s Labor Theory of Value and would allocate worth to an item based on the amount of time and labor

power that had gone into its creation. Because Proudon's system of mutualism still preserves the idea of a market where goods and services can be traded, his philosophy does not quite reach the heights of radical equality that later theorists like Kropotkin did. Since a person's economic well-being is based on their productivity, those who are part of a less productive industry or unable to work for some reason would be disadvantaged compared to the able-bodied and industrious. Still, the harsh denunciation of private property and the state in Proudhon's early theoretical work and his coining of the phrase "Property is Theft", as well as his advocacy for a society based on a federation of communes, greatly influenced the next generation of anarchist philosophers even if they largely left his idea of a mutualist economy behind.

The next major figure to take up the torch of anarchism was Mikhail Bakunin, a Russian revolutionary who travelled extensively in Europe and the thinker who firmly cemented collectivism as the main current in anarchist philosophy. Bakunin began his career as a student of German idealism, studying philosophers like Fichte and Hegel, and hoped to be a professor of philosophy in his adulthood. The course of his studies eventually brought him into contact with previously discussed thinkers like Proudhon and Karl Marx, two people who greatly influenced the development of Bakunin's political thought and his nascent radicalism. As his politics began to draw more steadily from the anarchist tradition, Bakunin supplemented his intellectual efforts in the field of political philosophy with direct action. Throughout much of his adult life, Bakunin lived an almost itinerant lifestyle, travelling across Europe to cities and nations experiencing social unrest and doing his best to foment revolution wherever he landed. He

participated in uprisings that took place in Prague and Dresden, among others, and as a result of his actions was imprisoned in Russia for a number of years in the 1850s. Through this time of direct action and organizing however, he was also writing, speaking, and further developing his anarchist theory. Among his major contributions were a view of humanity as inseparable from the natural world, as well as a more firmly defined vision of collectivist anarchism that would serve as the basis for many future theorists. Bakunin took certain cues from Proudhon in visualizing his collectivism, but goes beyond the previous thinker's conception of mutualism by incorporating some of the more communal elements of Marxism into his theory. Bakunin advocated for a society built on free agreement and voluntary institutions, where wages would be abolished in favor of "labor notes", a refined version of Proudhon's mutualism that allots workers notes with which to procure goods based on the difficulty of their job and the time worked. Though Bakunin is not the most systematic anarchist theorist, his unique blend of thought and action, as well as his solidification of the collectivist tendency, are enough to secure his place as one of the most important figures in the anarchist tradition.

Following in the footsteps of Bakunin, another Russian named Pyotr Kropotkin came to prominence as one of the most influential anarchists of all time through the creation of a system he called "anarcho-communism". This new strain of anarchist thought took the mutualism of Proudhon and the communalism of Bakunin a step further, mixing the anarchists' drive towards individualism and freedom with communism's emphasis on community and economic equality. Kropotkin was a very

practically minded theorist, and much of his writing focused on how a revolution could survive and perpetuate itself, as well as what a post-revolutionary society would actually look like. His most famous work, 1892's *The Conquest of Bread*, lays these theories out in detail and touches on every topic from revolutionary strategy to the necessity of luxury items in an anarchist society. As the title of the work indicates, Kropotkin was quite interested in food and the role it plays in a revolution, with his argument being that in order for a revolution to succeed, food must be the first thing secured by revolutionaries in order to keep the uprising from falling apart. He writes that food stores must be captured by the proletariat and the contents rationed out to all in order of their necessity, which will allow the revolution to stay its course instead of succumbing to disunity and chaos due to hunger. In this work Kropotkin also details the tenets of anarcho-communism, which eschews the market socialism of Proudhon and Bakunin in favor of an approach that entirely abolishes the wage system and operates under the maxim "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs". This system finally establishes full economic equality in an anarchist framework, and Kropotkin's theory even advocates for total equality between the sexes, a point that had been sorely neglected, or even argued against, by previous theorists. While this notion of anarcho-communism moved anarchism into new territories of economic theory, there were certain things that Kropotkin adopted more straightforwardly from his predecessors. He, like Proudhon and Bakunin before him, argued for a society based on free agreement and voluntary institutions, and a federation of communes that would provide mutual aid and support for one another. Where he built on these previous ideas

is by more closely examining their practical applications, and showing how voluntary, non-hierarchical institutions based on mutual agreement between individuals exist and thrive even under the hostile conditions of capitalism. With his focus on the practicalities of a revolutionary society and commitment to equality under anarcho-communism, Kropotkin became one of the most influential anarchists of his time, as well as ours.

Though nearly all of the foundational figures of anarchism were Europeans, Emma Goldman was an American who has had a great deal of impact on anarchist thought. Her essay *Anarchy: What It Really Stands For*, written in 1910, functions in a similar capacity to Marx and Engels' *The Communist Manifesto*, being a short work that outlines the main tenets of anarchism, addresses certain objections to the ideology, and serves as a good introduction to the basics of anarchist political theory. Though there is little formulation of original theory in this essay, Goldman does a good job of pulling together different tendencies in anarchist thought and presenting a clear and effective explanation of her political philosophy. Where Goldman's true originality begins to shine through, however, is in her later writing that combines feminist and anarchist thought. Where previous theorists had outright ignored or only briefly addressed issues of gender in society, Goldman formulated much of her theory around this central topic. In her strikingly titled essay *The Tragedy of Woman's Emancipation*, Goldman writes that the liberation of women can never be achieved under capitalism, that a classless and stateless society must first be brought about before they can become truly free from oppression. In this essay she also argues that suffrage for women is not necessarily a

useful political goal, that voting can only bring complacency and erode the drive for direct action, a strategy that she sees as far more effective than voting in helping women to realize their political goals. Goldman also wrote a number of other essays synthesizing anarchist and feminist theory, including one about the evils of prostitution and another attacking the institution of marriage, which she saw as just another way for women to be trapped and exploited by capitalist society. By synthesizing these two schools of thought, Emma Goldman helped to greatly develop the fields of both feminism and anarchism, and became one of the first major American anarchists in the process.

Though there are numerous other theories and philosophers that could have been discussed here, this chapter should serve as a sufficient primer to understand some of the ideas that Thomas Pynchon draws upon in his work. Anarchism is a wide and varied field of political theory and as such it is difficult to reduce all of its nuances to simple terms, but the core tenets of anarchism are easily understood. No matter their differences, all anarchists stand against the state and unjust hierarchies, which they see as agents curtailing individual freedom and limiting the vast potential of humanity. They envision a future where all of mankind is free from the bonds imposed upon them, and can exist in a society absent exploitation and based on cooperation between the individuals of this new world. Thomas Pynchon draws upon these ideas to articulate the political ideology of his own work, using concepts first laid out by Bakunin, Goldman, or Kropotkin in order to construct his critique of modern society, a critique that begins by

using anarchist theories to attack capitalist methods of control, as will be shown in the following chapter.

## Chapter Two

### “What is the Real Nature of Control?”: State Power and Systems of Oppression in *Gravity’s Rainbow*

Though it seeks to disguise itself and obfuscate its wide-ranging influence, control is one of the central factors of a postmodern existence. We in Western liberal democracies now live in what Gilles Deleuze termed a “society of control”<sup>1</sup>, a new order that sprung up in the wake of the Second World War to replace the tattered remnants of modernity, an invisible system of oppression that shields itself behind a veneer of freedom and choice. Deleuze writes that where a person’s life had previously been confined by obviously limiting factors such as the walls of a factory, a prison, or a school, societies of control disguise these constraints with ever-changing and free-flowing forms of domination. One of the most pertinent examples provided by Deleuze is that of the corporation (also a central concern of Pynchon’s), which he sees as having replaced the factory as the dominant controlling factor in the life of a worker. In place of the readily apparent limitations placed on the laborer by a factory, the corporation exerts its power in ways entirely more insidious, imposing its ideology on all aspects of a worker’s life, controlling their thoughts and actions even in the domestic sphere and other areas that would never have been considered any kind of “workplace” in previous eras. Deleuze argues that this diffuse, nearly invisible manner of control is administered through

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<sup>1</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. “Postscript on the Societies of Control.” *Surveillance, Crime and Social Control*, 2017, pp. 35–39.

technology, self-regulating markets, convenience, sophisticated advertising, all of the societal “advancements” that emerged out of the end of the Second World War and the dawn of the nuclear age. It is at this crucial juncture of history that Thomas Pynchon chooses to set *Gravity’s Rainbow*, his encyclopedic treatise raging against control in all its forms. Nearly every facet of the novel is bent towards this purpose, from its hallucinatory narrative structure to its revolutionary political ideology, and it is within this novel that Pynchon most meticulously catalogues the horrors of a life lived under total control, and in the process constructs an all-encompassing critique of capitalism, war, hierarchical power, and the state.

Like many of the major anarchist theorists, Thomas Pynchon identifies two main abusers of power and control in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, those being capitalism and the state. Though he by no means separates these concepts (the novel, in fact, presents them as inextricably linked phenomena), it is best to treat the corporation separately before addressing the ultimate synthesis of the two that forms one of the central theses of the novel. In order to understand Pynchon’s wide ranging and diffuse critique of these institutions we shall turn to the opening of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, where the war is coming to a close, V2 rockets are being fired into the streets of London in a final effort to turn the tide against the Allies, and the novel begins to gather evidence in its case against state and corporate control. *Gravity’s Rainbow* begins with a dream of a panicked evacuation from London that comes too late, routes of egress clogged up by the terrified masses and rockets already hurtling down. The first few pages of the novel move in a swirl of abstract prose, touching on the lives and fears of the evacuees, as well as their

route through the city and ultimate destination, before finally revealing the identity of the dreamer. His name is Geoffrey “Pirate” Prentice, an officer in the British Special Operations Executive (SEO), one of the many agencies that make up the list of confusing acronyms that litter the opening portions of the novel. It is here that Pynchon sets the plot of the novel (such as it is) into motion, with some slight details about the surveillance scheme being perpetrated on Tyrone Slothrop revealed, as well as early formulations of the case against control being introduced, more of which will be touched on presently.

Part One of *Gravity's Rainbow* abounds with conspiracy and paranoia, not the least of which is centered on the corporate entities who exert invisible control over the lives of the characters. There are sinister insinuations all throughout concerning the shadowy dealings of these entities, touching on everything from the illicit sexual conditioning of infants to collaboration with Fascist powers. One of the earliest of these comes in the novel's first major seance scene, which sees a group of British military personnel congregating in a dimly lit room in order to contact a spirit, who begins to expound on the nature of control in the modern era. “A market needed no longer be run by the Invisible Hand, but now could *create itself*--its own logic, momentum, style, from *inside*. Putting the control inside was ratifying what de facto had happened--that you had dispensed with God,”<sup>2</sup>. The spirit suggests that the main factor governing our lives under capitalism, the market, is no longer being controlled or held back by those who claim to understand it, represented here as the obsolete “Invisible Hand”. Instead, the

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<sup>2</sup> Pynchon, Thomas. *Gravity's Rainbow*. Penguin Books, 2006. Page 31.

market now operates of its own volition, has taken the control once held over it and absorbed it inside itself, now controlling the corporate entities who had once purported to exert influence over its vast reach. The spirit goes on to implicitly argue for the validity of Nietzsche's aphorism "God is dead", saying that in its increasing embrace of secular values and development away from Christian doctrine, Western society has replaced its previous conception of God with the economic structure of capitalism and a fanatical faith in the ability of the market to continue its expansion in perpetuity. There is also a suggestion here that by snatching control over itself back from its masters, the market has become for capitalists and economists what God was for the priests of previous centuries; a being of immense power and unknowable dimension never to be understood by its followers, only feared and worshipped.

The spirit continues on, further elucidating the problem of control with regards to the new sentience of the market and corporation. Directly after the above quoted passage, the spirit says "But you had taken on a greater, and more harmful, illusion. The illusion of control. That A could do B. But that was false. Completely. No one can *do*. Things only happen, A and B are unreal, are names for parts that ought to be inseparable..." (Pynchon, 31). In their rejection of God and embrace of the new capitalist order, the spirit suggests that the rulers of Western society have made a fatal blunder. The "illusion" of religion has been cast aside and a new, modern, "rational" order arose in its place, yet here the novel points to the fact that the arbiters of this new order are as incapable of understanding its mechanisms as they were far away from grasping the will of God. Thus this new illusion becomes "more harmful", as those in power can now

allow themselves to think that they are in control of the mechanism that drives society, which the novel sees as a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the capitalist market and the corporate entities that rise out of it. The novel looks at them as alien beings beyond human ken, their desires, methods, and rationale incomprehensible to the people they prey upon, especially those who pretend to be their masters. The spirit points to this contradiction inherent to the capitalist “illusion of control” as an incredibly dangerous factor in our contemporary society, one that if left unacknowledged and unchecked will cause economic collapse, lead nations to the brink of ruin, and cause human immiseration on a massive scale.

One of the other most astute critiques of corporate control employed by Pynchon in this novel is explored through the character of Tyrone Slothrop and the vast conspiracy surrounding him. This conspiracy is perpetrated against Slothrop by a variety of shadowy powers, including agents of both capital and state, but the exploitation truly begins under the direction of American capitalism and the autonomous corporation. Before analyzing the nuances and thematic implications of Pynchon’s representation of corporate evil, a brief overview of the conspiracy must first be given. Though the following information is doled out in a typically non-linear fashion throughout the novel, we learn that the origins of this plot against Slothrop lie in his infancy. Soon after he was born, Slothrop’s parents were approached by Lyle Bland and Lazlo Jamf, two men with close ties to the chemical supercorporation IG Farben. In return for the full payment of Slothrop’s education all the way through Harvard, his parents give him over to the care of Jamf and Bland, who use “Infant Tyrone” to

experiment with a new material being developed by IG Farben, called Imipolex G. They condition baby Slothrop to become aroused by the smell of the experimental plastic, and the young child becomes famous within scientific circles for participating in the study. However, when the two men are finished, they do not properly decondition him. Instead of resetting Infant Tyrone's libido to its previous state, they decondition him "beyond the zero", a phrase whose meaning is left somewhat ambiguous, though it seems that by taking Slothrop's sexual conditioning beyond its natural resting point, Jamf and Bland have somehow reversed temporality. Infant Tyrone is now able to preemptively sense the presence of Imipolex G.

This brings us to the novel's present day. Tyrone Slothrop is now stationed in London near the end of the war, and V2 rockets are hitting the city without warning. However, elements of Allied intelligence have discovered that the rockets are falling in a Poisson Distribution, a mathematical model that also strangely corresponds to a map Slothrop keeps of sexual encounters he has had all across London. Once the bizarre correlation between Slothrop's sexual conquests and sites of rocket strikes is discovered, he is put under surveillance and covertly experimented upon yet again. Friends and lovers turn out to be agents sent by corporations and governments, Slothrop's paranoia reaches its breaking point, and in order to escape it all he disappears into the anonymity of The Zone (a fictionalized version of post-war Germany) in search of both the elusive V2 rocket and answers about his mysterious connection to IG Farben and Imipolex G. The conspiracy Slothrop uncovers in the course of his quest is so wide-ranging and scattered that its contours are impossible to grasp on a first reading of

the novel, and even subsequent readings and careful perusals of the text lead to only a partial understanding of what is actually happening. Though this confusion is at times frustrating, it is also a large part of the novel's intention. With the impossible-to-grasp nature of the conspiracy, the novel places its reader directly in the position of its central character, leaving us to wallow in the same fear and paranoia Slothrop does, stumbling through the vast network of conspiracy and trying to make our own connections. It also serves to comment on our contemporary existence, that when living under a system of total control we cannot understand the full extent of the power being exerted over us, we can only fumble around the edges of its web. As the novel's narrator says, "You may never get to touch the Master, but you can tickle his creatures." (Pynchon, 240).

One thread of the vast conspiracy uncovered by Slothrop throughout *Gravity's Rainbow* is the fact of collaboration between corporations from Allied countries and Fascist states. One of these implications comes when Slothrop is being taught about rockets by the British government, and as part of his training, a man from Shell Oil named Hilary Bounce is sent to meet him. As they talk, it becomes clear that Shell has strange connections to both sides of the war, having made rocket fuel and propulsion systems for the Allied side while the headquarters of Royal Dutch Shell were simultaneously being used as a radio guidance system for the V2 rockets being fired into London by the Nazis. This all seems rather suspicious to Slothrop, and he says "I mean...doesn't it strike you as just a bit odd, you Shell chaps working on *your* liquid engine *your* side of the Channel you know, and *their* chaps firing *their* bloody things at you with your own...blasted...Shell transmitter tower, you see," (Pynchon, 244). Though

the novel soon moves on from this point, seeming to treat it as just another episode of comic paranoia, there is something else at play here, especially when this is taken in conjunction with the numerous other suggestions of a similar nature littered throughout the novel. The implication Slothrop is driving at is that the war may not be as two-sided as it is presented to the civilian population, that there may be individuals and corporations who move seamlessly between the Axis and the Allies, doing business with whoever will pay them in total disregard for any kind of moral imperative. Though this kind of “betrayal” may seem initially puzzling, when the nature of the market as revealed in the seance scene is taken into account, the corporation’s function in this capacity begins to become more clear. Pynchon sees markets and corporations as autonomous beings existing outside the confines of human understanding, with their primary drives being to perpetuate their own existence and exert an ever greater amount of control over society. The novel suggests that due to these existential imperatives there is no place for scruples within the corporation, as it must act only in its own interest even if that means selling its services to the other side of the war.

Having made this bizarre connection, Slothrop continues his investigation into the corporate forces arrayed against him. He follows the trail he has already partially uncovered, which leads him to the aforementioned experimental plastic called Imipolex G, developed for IG Farben by Lazlo Jamf. He finds out that this new plastic is being used in the guidance systems of V2 rockets being fired from Holland, which leads to the following: “Imipolex G shows up on a mysterious ‘insulation device’ on a rocket being fired with the help of a transmitter on the roof of the headquarters of Dutch Shell, who is

co-licensee for marketing the Impolex--a rocket whose propulsion system bears an uncanny resemblance to one developed by British Shell at around the same time..." (Pynchon, 254). Here we find the same implication of ten pages earlier concerning Shell playing both sides of the war, but this passage also reaches towards a larger network of collaboration between two seemingly separate corporate entities and Nazi Germany. Due to the fact of their national origin it should be no surprise that IG Farben is supplying the Nazi regime with rocket parts, especially given the rather vague delineations that exist between corporation and state in a Fascist system. In addition to this, however, the passage also points to a kind of international solidarity that exists between large-scale corporate entities, in this case represented by the collaboration between Shell and IG Farben. The novel suggests that our typical conception of capitalism as a system of businesses and corporations vying for control of the market is a farce, that these massive conglomerates really have no interest in competing with each other. Instead capital functions as one monolithic force, a profit-hungry behemoth that transcends both borders and political ideology in its unending quest for power. With this implication, the novel paints Shell Oil and IG Farben as two outgrowths of the same entity, their collaboration with each other, as well as Nazi Germany, nothing more than an inevitability born out of their drive to accrue power and profit.

Another of the major avenues for control employed by the corporation are products. Using these, corporate entities are able to assert themselves through marketing, as well as proliferation of the product itself throughout society, thus inserting the corporation into the everyday lives of the populace. *Gravity's Rainbow*

takes this metaphor of products (especially plastic ones) as a means of control and makes it literal, which becomes especially apparent in the case of Imipolex G, the product produced and sold by IG Farben. Like many of the disposable products churned out in service of our consumer society, Imipolex G is a plastic polymer that functions in many different capacities throughout the novel, but always serves as a means of control. One of the first contexts in which it is encountered is during the experiments on Infant Tyrone, as was introduced above. Jamf and Bland use their new plastic to condition baby Slothrop, literally controlling his sexual impulses with the smell of Imipolex G and further exerting influence over his life after the fact by deconditioning him “beyond the zero”, which causes Slothrop to experience arousal in places Imipolex G soon will be, instead of where it already has been. However, this is not the only time the plastic is used to exert a disturbing level of sexual control. A storyline later in the novel follows Greta Erdmann, a former film actress, as she tours rocket sites putting on bondage shows to entertain the Nazi troops. When she reaches the Heath (the launch site of the mysterious 00000 V2), Greta is pulled aside by two soldiers and strapped into a full-body suit of Imipolex G, which immobilizes her while bringing her into a prolonged state of arousal that seems to have been perfected since the time of the initial sexual experiments on baby Slothrop some years earlier. In an extremely disturbing sequence, Greta is kept trapped by the Impolex G suit and raped by soldiers over the course of days, only allowed her freedom once the 00000 has been launched and the rocket troops have dispersed to other launch sites throughout Nazi-occupied Europe. The inhumanity and alien nature of plastic is continually emphasized throughout the novel,

and episodes like this further the idea of plastic as a means of external control on the people by the corporation. IG Farben produces Impolex G with no concern as to its horrifying potential applications, and the product serves to exert both physical and mental control over those exposed to it. With this, the novel suggests that corporate power does not exist only in the abstract sense through capital and markets, but also exerts its influence through the practical applications of its products.

Pynchon continues to use Imipolex G as a literal representation of corporate control throughout the novel, with its implementation in the 00000 V2 being perhaps its ultimate application. This rocket is the final goal of Slothrop's quest, his white whale, and even though Pynchon keeps its true purpose obscure, the novel doles out enough information to give the reader a general idea of its function in the narrative. The rocket is a special project of Captain Weissmann (also known as "Dominus Blicero"), an officer in the German military who ranks highly in the Nazi rocket program. By digging through convoluted plots and investigating obscure connections, Slothrop eventually discovers that the 00000 V2 has been slightly modified in order to reorient its center of gravity around a device called the "Schwarzgerät", an insulation system that turns out to be constructed from Imipolex G. In the climactic pages of the novel the modified rocket is fired, and it is revealed that the Schwarzgerät has been installed in the rocket so that a young German soldier named Gottfried can be placed inside and launched along with the V2. Though the reasons for this are left ambiguous, the clues lie yet again with the connection between sexual domination and the literal representation of corporate control through Imipolex G. Towards the beginning of the novel, the reader's first

in-depth introduction to Weissmann/Blicero comes in a short episode relating his relationship with the aforementioned Gottfried, as well as Katje, a young Dutch woman who works as a double agent for British intelligence. Weissmann keeps the two of them locked within a game of sexual control and domination modelled on the Hansel and Gretel fairy tale, which ends only when Katje is able to escape and make her way back into the hands of her friends in Allied intelligence. Gottfried, regrettably, is unable to break free from Weissmann's control, and by the end of the novel has fallen so far under the man's spell that he voluntarily agrees to take part in the ultimate sacrificial ritual, the firing of the 00000 rocket. This points yet again to a link between plastic, control, and the corporation. Gottfried exists only to be sacrificed at the altar of this controlling technology, with Imipolex G and Weissmann acting as representatives of the dual power of corporation and state, each one seeking to extend the sphere of their control over the whole of society, an act of domination which is represented here by the ritual sacrifice of Gottfried and the forcibly intertwined sexual and technological apparatus of the young German soldier and the 00000 rocket.

This interweaving of corporation and state is another of Pynchon's central concerns that is explored over the course of *Gravity's Rainbow*. There are countless insinuations concerning the level of continuity between these two major agents of control, with the inevitability of their final synthesis being one of the greatest horrors presented by the novel. In this vision of the state as corporation (or the corporation as state), agents move freely back and forth between the two, methods of control are shared, and systems of oppression are expanded to blanket all of society in an effort to

suppress popular will and dominate the individual. Pynchon uses the late Weimar period and the rise of Nazism to elucidate the destructive power of this dangerous combination, but he does not stop there, going on to cast a critical eye on ostensibly democratic nations such as the United States, whose latent fascism and slow melding of state and corporation are more obscure than in Nazi Germany, but no less destructive, as will be shown in Pynchon's subsequent discussion of the disturbing continuities between Nazi Germany and the post-war United States.

This conception of the state and corporation as blended entities is first expanded upon during the second, and arguably most important, of the novel's seance sequences. The spirit being consulted in this case is Walther Rathenau, the late foreign minister for Germany during the Weimar period, who is contacted by a medium named Peter Sascha at the behest of a diverse audience that ranges from former elements of the German left to upper-class socialites, and even a few high ranking members of the emerging Nazi party. However, before allowing the spirit to speak, the novel gives a short history of the actions of Rathenau and his role in originating what Pynchon calls the 'cartel-state'. "...He had coordinated Germany's economy during the World War, controlling supplies, quotas and prices, cutting across and demolishing the barriers of secrecy and property that separated firm from firm--a corporate Bismark, before whose power no account book was too privileged, no agreement too clandestine," (Pynchon, 167). Rathenau is presented as a kind of innovator, the man who ushered in the modern nation in the wake of World War I by erasing any pretense of a delineation between the apparatus of the state and that of the corporations who operate within its national boundaries. The

novel says that by using the excuse of wartime exigencies, Rathenau was able to centralize almost the whole of the German economy under the control of his office, where he was able to have complete access to every level of the corporate sector, ultimately causing the boundaries between firms began to melt away under his careful administration.

The passage continues, going further into Rathenau's history and role in the formation of this new kind of state. Directly after the quotation provided above, the novel goes on to explain that Rathenau did not confine his ambitions simply to the reorganization of the German economy and state, but that he conceived of this as a model for an entirely new world order. "He saw the war in progress as a world revolution, out of which would arise neither Red communism nor an unhindered Right, but a rational structure in which business would be the true, the rightful authority--a structure based, not surprisingly, on the one he'd engineered in Germany for fighting the World War," (Pynchon, 167). This, even more so than the previous passage, represents the final synthesis of corporation and state. If the two were to become inextricably intertwined in just one nation, such as Germany, the novel suggests that the damage would not be so great. But by imposing this system on the entirety of the post-World War I order, Rathenau has effectively erased all boundaries that had previously separated the corporation and the state, ensuring that capital can always flow freely between all nations, unhindered by any border now that the state has become just yet another arm of the autonomous corporate entity. The text also refers to Rathenau as a "philosopher", pointing to the fact that this restructuring was not the enterprise of a

man driven by the necessities of war, but was instead the act of an ideologue, someone driven to impose their will on the world and reshape it to their own specifications. This returns to the anxieties presented by the novel's first seance scene, those being the loss of control over the market and the subsequent refusal to admit it, all of which is only exacerbated by the erasure of any previously existing delineation between the state and the corporation. The novel suggests that Rathenau's fanatical drive to create a final, worldwide synthesis of the two entities has established the conditions for a kind of control more totalizing and oppressive than ever before, a juggernaut of capital and state power that will be able to cast its shadow over the whole of Western civilization.

This fear of the twin corporate and state entity is continually elaborated upon over the course of the Rathenau seance. As she watches the event's progression, Leni (the character who guides the reader through this scene) begins to think that there is some hidden structure lying behind all of this, a world accessible only to the powerful and forever hidden from normal people. "But Generaldirektor Smaragd and colleagues are not here to be told what even the masses believe. It might almost--if one were paranoid enough--seem to be a collaboration here, between both sides of the Wall, matter and spirit. What is it they know that the powerless do not? What terrible structure behind the appearance of diversity and enterprise?" (Pynchon, 167-168). "The Wall" discussed here refers to the veil dividing the world of spirit from the material realm, but when looked at in context can also be taken to mean the political wall dividing Axis and Allied powers. Taken along with the numerous insinuations contained within this section and others concerning the level of collaboration between "sides" of

the war, this suggestion of conspiracy between two planes of existence becomes representative of the war. Those who have power in a seance (i.e. those with the ability to reach beyond the veil and interact with the spirit world) correlate to the people in positions of social and economic power during wartime, who are able to see beyond the false narrative of war presented to the public and access the true mechanisms that drive the conflict. Likewise, those without the power to interact with the spirit realm, such as Leni, are only able to grasp the very edges of a structure beyond their comprehension, knowing something is there, but unable to fully understand it. This returns again to one of the central themes underpinning the text, that the lower classes are forever locked out of the halls of power, able to see the vague outline of the system that keeps them under control, but unable to ever comprehend its full form.

As Rathenau's spirit begins to speak, he further confirms Leni's paranoid suspicions. The former minister says in his own words that in the world of spirit (that plane accessible only to the most powerful of our own material realm), there is a structure that can be comprehended, a full model of our world that exists outside of linear time and space and holds the key to unlocking the innermost machinations of our existence. "The path is clear...You are constrained, over there, to follow it in time, one step after another. But here it's possible to see the whole shape at once--not for me, I'm not that far along--but many know it as a clear presence..." (Pynchon, 168). Rathenau confirms that there is indeed a larger form to be grasped, that what is visible from a mortal vantage point is not all there is to see. He goes on to say that it has grown difficult for him to see things from a human point of view, that even though he has only

recently been indoctrinated into the spiritual mysteries, the larger pattern is now all that he is able to see. Even with his knowledge of this larger structure Rathenau admits that he cannot yet see every facet of it, which is strange, especially given the novel's implication of his role in the rise of the modern capitalist world order. With this, the novel says that even the most powerful among humanity, the ones who shape the world and purport to understand its inner workings, are unable to entirely understand the machinery that drives our society. In order to even begin to see the true nature of things, one must step beyond the limits of mortality and temporality and begin to see in a nonlinear fashion, as the system we have created to control ourselves has grown far too large and complex to ever be understood through conventional means.

Rathenau's spirit continues on, beginning to sketch out some of the connections between Germany and the United States. He starts by addressing a drug called Oneirine, a hallucinogen developed by Lazlo Jamf for IG Farben that induces a warped perception of time in the mind of the user. An employee of IG Farben named Wimpe is implicated in connection with Oneirine by Rathenau, which becomes significant when Pynchon reveals that Wimpe was sent to work in the U.S. by IG Farben, who hoped to use the proliferation of their products in the United States to extend their influence on the global economy. Rathenau exposes this connection by saying "But all I have is the molecule, the sketch...Methoneirine, as the sulphate. Not in Germany, but in the United States. There is a link to the United States. A link to Russia. Why do you think von Maltzan and I saw the Rapallo treaty through?" (Pynchon, 169). The novel points to Wimpe and Oneirine as elements of the German blend of state and corporation that

were able to infiltrate the United States, furthering the latter nation's own propensity for free marketeering and the reckless accumulation of capital. Under Rathenau's system, the introduction of IG Farben and its products into the economy of the United States is effectively the same as giving the German state a foothold on American soil, and given that the novel points to the latent fascism of the Weimar period through Rahtenau's economic scheme and the horrifying scenes of the Herero genocide, it should come as no surprise that Pynchon's critical eye lands next on America's political landscape. By establishing this thread of continuity between Nazi Germany and the United States, the novel begins to build its case for the disturbing parallels between the two, and the inevitability of the consumption of each by the twin forces of state and corporation.

The novel's concern with this continuity between Germany and the United States continues throughout, most notably in its discussion of what happened to the defeated Nazis in the wake of the war. Later in the novel, as several characters are closing in on the location of the Schwartzgerät, they catch up to a former Nazi scientist codenamed "Wenk". As they interrogate him, he begins to reminisce about the last days of the Nazi rocket program, recalling a conversation where one of his friends was discussing their uncertain future, saying "I couldn't go with von Braun...not to the Americans, it would only just keep on the same way...I want it really to be over, that's all...good-by, Wenk," (Pynchon, 464). This passage alludes to the American practice of recruiting scientists from the German rocket program, pardoning them and transporting them to the United States where they would contribute to a variety of top-secret governmental initiatives, including the space program and the development of long-range nuclear weaponry.

Wernher von Braun was among the most famous of these recruits, a man who had been heavily involved in the testing and development of the V2 rocket, and was later integral to the creation of ballistic missiles for the American military after his relocation to the U.S. as part of Operation Paperclip, the codename given to the recruitment program mentioned above. The anonymous character quoted here seems to have a kind of precognition about the aims of the American military in recruiting German rocket scientists. He somehow senses that the United States will not put these skills to any greater or more benevolent use than the Germans did, that instead the same research will be carried out and iterated upon, and that it will all eventually be bent towards the exact same destructive ends. By refusing the offer to relocate along with von Braun, this character hopes to break the cycle of violence and destruction that he has been caught in. He recognizes that by lending his talents to the Americans he will not be atoning for his role in the Nazi war machine, but instead just helping to perpetuate the same violent structures he has tried so hard to put behind him.

Though this very direct implication of continuity between Nazi Germany and post-war America drops out of the novel for a time, it returns more prominently than ever near the end. In yet another section exploring the mystical and occult (this time through tarot cards), the novel discusses the future prospects of Weissmann/Blicero, a man shown to be almost entirely absent of human empathy and the closest thing *Gravity's Rainbow* has to a central antagonist. At the beginning of this episode, the novel lays out the tarot hand Weissmann has been dealt and moves through every card, each one seemingly portending great things in his future. Finally, Pynchon arrives at the

last card in Weissmann's hand and drops the abstraction of the previous tarot readings, saying directly "If you're wondering where he's gone, look among the successful academics, the Presidential advisors, 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, 764). Here, Weissmann's future is shown to be incredibly bright. He, and all the others he symbolizes, have spent years enacting the most disturbing and inhumane policies that could be conceived of by the Nazi regime, firing rockets at civilians, destroying whole cities and countries, filling the death camps. Yet there are to be no consequences for their part in all of this. Instead they will be rewarded by the world they've created, quietly moved to America and placed in lucrative positions in the private sector or the government, inducted once again into the highest echelons of power. With this, the novel completes its critique of the final synthesis between corporation and state, between Nazi Germany and the United States. It suggests that if men like Weissmann are allowed to thrive under the purview of the corporate state, there can be no justice, no redemption of the system. The only alternative that remains is an absolute rejection of the ruling order and the rise of a radically new political system to carry us into the future.

Like any anarchist philosopher, Pynchon begins his critique of the current political and economic system by identifying the major inhibitors of individual freedom, in this case the corporation and the state. The novel points to these as the two institutions most dangerous to the social fabric of our world, with their inherent need to grow and dominate coming at the cost of freedom for all those who must live under their

rule. *Gravity's Rainbow* takes on both of these entities, showing the individual faults and transgressions of each one before critiquing their synthesis in the corporate state as the ultimate inhibitor of freedom, an all-encompassing system of oppression that is able to project its power into each facet of everyday life. So in response to Walther Rathenau's question "What is the real nature of control?", the novel begins to formulate an answer. It says that control is an ever-present, inescapable fact of existence under capitalism, apparent in every aspect of life from government, to the economic market, and even to the plastic products that fill our stores and homes. By identifying these agents of control and articulating a comprehensive critique of the oppressive structures that enable their existence, *Gravity's Rainbow* places itself firmly in the anti-capitalist, anti-authoritarian tradition of anarchism and, as will be shown, provides not only a negative critique of the state of the world, but also advocates for revolutionary action in the face of this overwhelming domination and control.

## Chapter Three

### Anarchy and Resistance in *Gravity's Rainbow*

Once it has catalogued and analyzed the threat that the conjoined corporate and state apparatus poses to humanity, *Gravity's Rainbow* begins to define its own political ideology. The novel's politics do not rest solely on the negation of the current system; it instead plots its own course towards a new political future, using a base of anarchist philosophy derived from thinkers like Bakunin and Kropotkin. Up to this point, analysis has focused mainly on the novel's treatment of state and corporation as major factors in the oppression of humanity, and though this identification of unjust hierarchical structures and institutions is a central tenet of anarchism, it is far from the whole story. The anarchist system of thought not only critiques the current state of social development, but also provides a positive (some would say utopian) view of the future, laying out a revolutionary program and strategy, as well as offering a vision for the idealized society that would coalesce in the wake of such a revolutionary upheaval. These are the two basic prongs of anarchist thought, each supporting and developing the case of the other to give the system as a whole a solid theoretical ground to stand on. *Gravity's Rainbow* continues in this tradition, having already critiqued the conditions as they stand, and now turning its gaze towards the future. Throughout the novel, Pynchon is fascinated by places in flux, areas over which corporate and state powers have yet to extend their control, such as the occupied Zone of post-war Germany, the

Moon, and the mythical pampas of Argentina's past. For the novel these spaces represent a revolutionary potential, the possibility of living a life free from oppression and exploitation by coming together in solidarity and creating a new society free of chains. However, the novel is also aware of the difficulty in keeping this kind of society safe from the corrosive influence of unfriendly outside forces, and there are numerous suggestions throughout that true anarchism may never be realized on a permanent basis due to overwhelming opposition from reactionary capitalist powers. In this way, *Gravity's Rainbow* constantly oscillates between optimism and cynicism, the hope for a better future and total resignation to an unbearable present. Despite all its doubts, the conclusion the novel ultimately comes to is one of revolution, believing wholeheartedly in the necessity of resistance to power even if it is doomed to failure.

Pynchon's first focus in building the novel's anarchist politics is looking at what the social and political conditions must be for the establishment of this new system. As mentioned above, his main prognosis is that anarchy can most easily and realistically be established when systems of domination have yet to be established, or when the strictures of capitalism have crumbled away and there is no new political order to replace or reinstate them as of yet. *Gravity's Rainbow* identifies The Zone (the semi-fictionalized version of post-war Germany that serves as the setting for much of the novel) as one of these places of potential, seeing in its borderless chaos the seeds of a beautiful new society. This perspective is first explored through the character of Squallidozzi, an Argentinian anarchist that Slothrop meets in Zurich and occasionally works alongside. As they begin to converse, Squallidozzi tells Slothrop his reasons for

leaving the pampas of Argentina and why he has come to Europe to realize his anarchist dream. “Decentralizing, back towards anarchism, needs extraordinary times...this War--this incredible War--just for the moment has wiped out the proliferation of little states that’s prevailed in Germany for a thousand years. Wiped it clean. *Opened it,*” (Pynchon, 268). Squallidozzi and his Argentinian comrades see opportunity in this war torn land, the promise of a long-held dream finally fulfilled after it had been crushed over and over again in their native country. Here the novel represents the war not only as an outpouring of death and annihilation, but also as a tool for liberation, an unfortunate evil that has nonetheless created the conditions for a just and equal society to be born out of its ashes. By collapsing the borders that have separated people for so long, the war has inadvertently brought about an ideal territory for anarchist experimentation, an open land with truly egalitarian potential if people like Squallidozzi can only seize the opportunity.

However, this anarchistic energy--like that of a V2 hanging over the skies of London--remains only potential. Slothrop stands in for the non-believers in the audience, questioning Squallidozzi’s premises and the viability of his dream, wondering how long this experiment could possibly last. The Argentine replies, saying “It won’t last. Of course not. But for a few months...perhaps there’ll be peace by autumn--*disculpame*, the spring, I still haven’t gotten used to your hemisphere--for a moment of spring perhaps...” (Pynchon, 268). Squallidozzi readily acknowledges the struggles his dream faces, the slim chance it has for long-term success. Yet this does not deter him, far from it in fact. Instead, he sees even the smallest victory for anarchism as an

unqualified success, even if it lasts only for a short while. If he and his comrades are able to strike back at the ruling order with their utopia, though it may last only for a week or a month, it has all been worth every bit of effort. The novel's invocation of "spring" here is critical, as it is only in this mystical time of new life and rebirth that Squallidozzi's dream can bloom, becoming a solitary outpost of pure idealism surrounded by the ruins of the previous capitalist order.

Slothrop again pushes back against Squallidozzi's optimism, still not believing in the viability of this dream, asking how the anarchists can possibly take and defend their land in the face of superior military force. Squallidozzi immediately corrects Slothrop, saying, "No. Taking land is building more fences. We want to leave it open. We want it to grow, to change. In the openness of the German Zone, our hope is limitless," (Pynchon, 268). The anarchists see even the concept of holding land as a concession to the status quo, that in order to truly break with the current system they must entirely repudiate every one of its values, including the control of land by a centralized body. Squallidozzi says that in this state of openness the land and all those within it will be able to grow and change, to realize their full potential outside of the strictures imposed by capital and the state, that this hope for metamorphosis, no matter how long it may last, is ultimately the engine that drives this anarchist project. This brings up a point that will be returned to again and again over the course of the novel, that being the necessity of retaining a revolutionary hope even in the face of unbeatable odds. Squallidozzi and his compatriots realize that their goals may not be realistic, that they may fail and even die in the pursuit of a better world, yet they are duty-bound to try anyways because the alternative is to lie

down and give up, to surrender to a system that stands against everything they believe in.

Squallidozzi's assertion that the War has opened the Zone, freeing it to pursue an alternate destiny, is continually backed up by the novel over the course of the narrative. There are innumerable suggestions of this new openness, both in terms of physical borders and political possibilities, each one further validating the Argentine's claim. One comes when Slothrop is first getting lost in the Zone, and begins to feel a greater connection to his ancestors. "Yet he feels his own, stronger now as borders fall away and the Zone envelops him, his own WASPs in buckled black..." (Pynchon, 286). This idea recurs again when Slothrop goes aloft in an air balloon and apologizes for making the pilot fly through Soviet-controlled airspace, to which his guide replies, "There are no zones...No zones but the Zone," (Pynchon, 338). The novel continually points to the Zone as a space of exception, the one place where a person's nationality means nothing, where not even the most powerful countries with all their military might can quite seize the control they so crave. The novel again makes this idea explicit in a later episode, where a character named Enzian is riding his motorcycle through the ruins of the Zone and thinks, "Once it was necessary to know uniforms, insignia, airplane markings, to observe boundaries. But by now too many choices have been made. The single root lost, way back there in the May desolation," (Pynchon, 528). By this point, the Zone has become a boundaryless land, a condition the anarchists see as containing unlimited potential. Though state and corporate powers have reared their heads all over the Zone, they have not yet been able to fully catch hold of it, which leaves a small window for

Squallidozzi and others like him to strike. Though there is the suggestion that the Zone will not remain forever uncorrupted, the novel's depiction of its resistance to domination by state power lends some credence to the anarchists' strategy and shows at least a small glimmer of hope for their chances at success.

Like any number of other characters throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*, Squallidozzi and his anarchist cadre drop out of the novel's view for a time before reemerging once again from the anonymity of the Zone, this time with their full roster of personnel riding along in a hijacked German U-boat. As the novel introduces its reader to the full complement of anarchist rebels beyond just Squallidozzi, we begin to see that they are not quite so united as might have been assumed, that even with their lofty dreams of utopian existence in the Zone there exists factionalism and division among the crew. Within their ranks is a faction consisting of a stuck-in-the-past gaucho named El Ñato and a romantic poet named Felipe who idolizes the older man, each of them wishing for a return to the mythical pampas of the past that Squallidozzi discussed with Slothrop. The ship's engineer, Belaustegui, is a strictly secular and scientific man, which causes him to run afoul of El Ñato, who thinks of him as a "godless Mesopotamian Bolshevik," (Pynchon, 390), a conflict that the novel says "is a strain on their solidarity, but then it's only one of several," (Pynchon, 390). The other major factor in their strained relations is a rather complicated romantic situation involving a woman named Luz, the young poet Felipe, and the currently absent Squallidozzi, which causes issues for the crew, especially when Felipe's personal dislike of El Ñato is taken into account.

Though this in-group bickering may seem inconsequential at first glance, when examined more closely it can be read as a commentary on political issues affecting contemporary America. Given the timeframe *Gravity's Rainbow* was written in and the themes of the novel up to this point, this episode can be looked at as a commentary on (and diagnosis of) the death of the American counterculture. This would become a recurring theme in Pynchon's work, especially in novels such as *Vineland* and *Inherent Vice*, with his position emerging here as a somewhat cynical take on the long-term prospects and potential pitfalls of horizontal organization as a force in opposition to capital. The petty squabbles of the anarchists aboard the U-boat stand in for the disunity of purpose and factionalism that was partially responsible for the failure of the 1960's New Left, which would almost certainly have struck Pynchon as a great tragedy given the political sympathies that are revealed in a reading of his work. Though this diagnosis of the 60's counterculture may have a rather despairing tone, this seeming cynicism is not meant to say that there is no hope for change, or that anarchist organization is totally incapable of effectively resisting the forces of capitalism, but is instead intended to pass on a warning to a future generation of radicals, showing them the failures of their predecessors and helping them to avoid the potentially deadly traps of disunity and factionalism in their pursuit of a better world.

The novel continues with this binary of hopefulness and cynicism as the anarchists' storyline moves along and they are presented with potential new ways to realize their ambitions. As Squallidozzi is being hunted by unnamed and malicious forces, he runs across Gerhart Von Göll (a.k.a. "Der Springer"), a German film director

with ties to major powers on both sides of the war. Earlier in the novel it was revealed that he assisted Allied intelligence with a propaganda initiative entitled “Operation Black Wing”, where he helped create a supposed found-footage film of West African troops working for the Nazi rocket program, which turned out to actually be a real military company called the Schwarzkommando. After this bizarre coincidence, Von Göll becomes convinced that his films have the power to manifest reality, which he tries to convince Squallidozzi of as they discuss making a film together. “My images, somehow, have been chosen for incarnation. What I can do for the Schwarzkommando I can do for your dream of pampas and sky...I can take down your fences and labyrinth walls, I can lead you back to the Garden you hardly remember...” (Pynchon, 394). Eventually they settle on making an adaptation of *Martin Fierro*, an Argentine epic poem about an anarchist gaucho who reclaims the pampas and resists the centralized governmental power of Buenos Aires. With this film, Von Göll believes that he can bring into reality the anarchists’ dream for the Zone’s future, creating their ideal society in real life through the act of filming its fictional inception. There are several suggestions over the course of the novel that the line between film and reality is anything but impermeable, and Von Göll’s plan for *Martin Fierro* is yet another manifestation of this idea, this time taking on a hopeful connotation in its aspirations to change the world for the better.

However, even this hopeful prospect comes saddled with a measure of cynicism. Despite Von Göll’s promise to help the anarchists realize their goals, he does not truly believe in their ideals, instead wanting to work with them only to see his cinematic

vision flourish into a true reality, thus boosting his already inflated ego. After his “success” with the Schwarzkommando project, the German filmmaker has become obsessed with his own supposed powers and is looking for any creative outlet on which to test them, the most convenient at this moment being Squallidozzi and his crew. Beyond the realization of his egoistic pursuits, the other thing Von Göll is most interested in is profit. The novel details the filmmaker’s diverse range of business interests, reaching from contracts with Allied intelligence, to ties with chemical supercorporation IG Farben, to the elements of organized crime he is engaged with when Squallidozzi first runs into him. Because of his hunger for profit, Von Göll wants to engage with the final product of his collaboration with the Argentinians in a monetary fashion, not on a level of pure idealism as the anarchists wish to. Because of this, the filmmaker hopes to make a part two of *Martin Fierro* based on a later addition to the poem, “in which the gaucho sells out: assimilates back into Christian society, gives up his freedom for the kind of constitutional Gesellschaft being pushed in those days by Buenos Aires,” (Pynchon, 393). Though the anarchists of course oppose the adaptation of this second part, Von Göll sees it as the only option in the case of the first film’s success. He does not look at *Martin Fierro* as an ideological project in the same way the Argentinians do, he is only in it for the prospect of material gain. This means that if they want the opportunity to manifest their dreams through film, the anarchists are going to need to compromise their ideals, to work within the capitalist system for profit. And after all, as Der Springer says, “Even the freest of gauchos end up selling out, you know. That’s how things are,” (Pynchon, 393).

The next time we come across the anarchists, they are building the set for *Martin Fierro* and waiting for Von Göll to arrive. By some sinister coincidence, the Heath has been chosen for the filming location, the very same place Weissmann launched the ooooo V2 from. The search for this mysterious rocket brings a Soviet officer named Vaslav Tchicherine to the nascent film set, where he finds a fully functioning village, stocked with real food and drink and being inhabited by the Argentinians. The anarchists living here are still plagued by some of the same divisions that split them aboard the U-boat, but now that they are beginning to build upon the early stages of their ambitions, a more peaceful atmosphere reigns. One of the women in the group, Graciela, begins to doubt her own commitment to the revolutionary cause in the face of death, before realizing that she can draw her strength from the collective. “She doesn’t know, if the moment came, how strong she’d be. Often at night she’ll break through a fine membrane of alcohol and optimism to see how much she really needs the others, how little use, unsupported, she could ever be,” (Pynchon, 624). Once they have escaped the claustrophobic confines of the U-boat and truly begun to construct the beginnings of their utopian project, the anarchists start to realize that in order for their mission to succeed they must come together and overcome the petty issues that had been splitting them. This episode contains the hopeful suggestion that despite any previous bickering or factional division, the onset of true revolutionary activity will begin to smooth over these old divides and lead to a greater togetherness, the peace in this case brought about by the anarchists’ dual artistic and political project. The novel suggests that this kind of

solidarity is the only way forward, the only way to bring to fruition the dreams of all those who hope to build a new society free from domination.

However, with this newfound hopefulness also comes a degree of uncertainty about the future. As the film set and the anarchists' potential utopia are being built simultaneously, the question discussed earlier by Slothrop and Squallidozzi comes up yet again; how long can this last? As the extras for the film come and go, a few planning to stay for a long time and some only waiting for a train to take them home, the anarchists begin to wonder, "Will others come? And what will the military government think of a community like this in the middle of their garrison state?" (Pynchon, 624). Everyone working on the film is welcome to stay at the recently-built village to try and recreate in real life the utopian society shown in the movie, but among the leaders of the project there arise questions about how many who are here now will actually stay after the film production ends, and how many of the dispossessed from across the Zone will have the will or the means migrate to the village to build a new life. There is also the question of authority, and what the military powers prowling the Zone will think of this new autonomous collective staking their claim to a life lived outside of the strictures imposed by capitalist society. These uncertainties are the culmination of the anarchists' storyline, as after this episode they drop almost entirely out of the novel's view, apart from a brief mention in one of Slothrop's more disjointed hallucinations. This ambivalent position they are left in is indicative of a larger trend, in that the novel will point to some optimistic or hopeful prospect for true revolution before introducing a kind of gnawing doubt into the equation. However, despite these doubts and

uncertainties, the anarchists continue to remain faithful to the cause, and even though the novel may not show it, the reader knows that they will carry on in their struggle no matter what the cost.

The stateless existence desired by the Argentinians is explored in other areas of the book as well, most notably through the potential of the rocket. Various characters throughout the novel think of rockets not as the destructive force the novel often shows them as, but instead as a liberatory technology with the potential to save humanity. One of these dreamers is Franz Pökler, a German scientist who hopes to harness the rocket to bring humankind into a new age of space travel. He begins his career as nothing but an amateur enthusiast, one member of a collective that hopes to build an operational rocket with the eventual goal of reaching space. The project begins innocently, but as the years wear on, it catches the eye of the Nazi government and is slowly folded into the ranks of the military. Pökler tries his best to ignore this development in favor of concentrating on his utopian dreams, but his wife Leni, a leftist militant, tries to get him to see the true outcomes of his research. During an argument in which Leni tells him that he is only being used by the Nazis in order to murder innocents, Pökler replies, “We’ll all use *it*, someday, to leave the earth. To transcend... Someday...they won’t have to kill. Borders won’t mean anything. We’ll have all outer space...” (Pynchon, 406). Pökler believes that though his designs are being employed for evil ends in the present, the rocket’s potential for salvation makes everything worth it. He believes that if humanity can only make it to the stars all conflict will cease to exist, the need to kill will be subverted through technological innovation. The novel portrays Pökler as at best a

deluded dreamer (unlike the anarchists), too stupid or stubborn to see that his utopian vision is being used for evil purposes, and refusing to fight back against this appropriation of his technology. His vision of a borderless future can come only at the expense of countless lives in the present, unwilling though he may be to acknowledge that fact. The novel does not see technological advancement as any kind of saving grace, viewing the utopian potential of the rocket as nothing more than a lie to trick dreamers like Pökler into working towards destructive ends. With this, Pynchon says that societal change cannot be brought about through individual effort and the forward march of technology, but only through collective action and resistance on a large scale, as represented by the Argentinians.

Though the novel does not see technological innovation as a promising avenue of liberation, it continues to make known its position on the necessity of resistance to the capitalist ruling order. In an episode later in the novel, Pirate Prentice reenters the narrative once again and descends into a hallucinatory dreamworld filled with spies, double agents, fellow members of the Counterforce, and radical preachers. Prentice runs across the last of these outside of a trailer with a shingle reading “Devil’s Advocate”, where a Jesuit priest is delivering a sermon for all who wish to hear. His speech begins with a despairing tone, as the Jesuit warns that a critical mass of control will soon be reached where the entirety of society will be under the thumb of just a few people, who he says may have even found a way to cheat death. “If They have taken much more, and taken not only from Earth, but also from us--well, why begrudge Them, when they’re just as doomed to die as we are? All in the same boat, all under the same

shadow...yes...yes. But is that really true? Or is it the best, and the most carefully propagated of all Their lies, known and unknown?” (Pynchon, 548). The priest suggests that those who control society have gained so much power that they have surpassed even death itself, in at least a metaphorical way if not a strictly literal one. The mechanisms of control that the ruling class once built have now taken on a life of their own (as explained in the previous chapter), and have reached a point where their power is self-sustaining and independent of any particular individual. Through the use of these mechanisms, the capitalist order has created a system of power and control that extends far beyond any one person’s lifespan, thus exerting its destructive influence over multiple generations and, in a way, moving beyond the confines of life and death.

Despite this rather dire evaluation of the state of the world, the Jesuit goes on to preach the necessity of resistance to this overwhelming system of control. What follows in the priest’s sermon is a passage central to the novel’s political messaging, and which is worth quoting here at length.

To ask that we keep faith in Their mortality, faith that They also cry, and have fear, and feel pain, faith that They are only pretending Death is Their servant--faith in Death as the master of us all--is to ask for an order of courage that I know is beyond my own humanity, though I cannot speak for others...But rather than make that leap of faith, perhaps we will chose instead to turn, to fight: to demand, from those for whom we die, our own immortality. They may not be dying in bed any more, but maybe They can still die from violence. If not, at least we can learn to withhold from Them our fear of Death. For every kind of vampire, there is a kind of cross. And at least the physical things They have taken, from Earth and from us, can be dismantled, demolished-- returned to where it all came from.

To believe that each of Them *will* personally die is also to believe that Their system will die--that some chance of renewal, some dialectic, is still operating in History. To affirm Their mortality is to affirm Return. (Pynchon, 549)

This speech constitutes the most radical call to action presented by the novel thus far. Though the priest initially continues in his disturbing assessment of the limitless power of the bourgeoisie and their deathless existence, he soon changes tack and presents an alternative. He says that instead of blindly accepting the current order (an acceptance he calls a “leap of faith”), the oppressed may instead choose to rise up, affirm the validity of their own existence by taking back their freedom from the ones who stole it away. As touched on above, the novel says that the metaphorical deathlessness of the bourgeoisie comes from the conjoined machinery of capital and state, a system that extends far beyond the lives of the individuals who set it into motion and will continue in its self-perpetuating cycle unless there arises a concerted effort to stop it. The priest suggests that it is only through direct and radical action against this system that the masses will be able to “kill” the ruling class, dismantling the mechanisms through which the bourgeoisie exert control over their subjects, thus freeing the working class from the capitalist system’s all-encompassing influence. The priest calls for “Their” works to be disassembled, returned to the people that they came from, and the only way this can happen is large-scale resistance to power on a societal level. With the Jesuit’s speech, the novel most clearly articulates its desire for revolution against the capitalist system, seeing radical resistance against the ruling class and their networks of control as the only way to achieve freedom and regain human dignity for the lower classes.

Though the Jesuit’s speech is the most overt call to action presented by *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the novel continues to deliver its revolutionary message through more covert means. Just a few pages before Pirate’s dream of the radical priest comes “Doper’s

Greed”, a film that seems at first glance to be just another of the novel’s many comedic asides, but takes on an entirely different aspect once the novel has been finished and the scene reexamined. As she wanders the deserted corridors of “The White Visitation” (a mental hospital-turned-headquarters for several branches of Allied intelligence), the Dutch double-agent Katje comes across a room filled with film canisters and begins to watch them at random, eventually coming across “Doper’s Greed”, a short film that has been haphazardly spliced onto the end of another unrelated reel of film. “Doper’s Greed” is a musical comedy set in the American Wild West, wherein two cowboys ride into town, encounter its diminutive sheriff, then proceed to debate the question of his reality for an hour and a half, with the discussion interrupted only by the occasional musical number or gunshot. Though on an initial reading this brief scene seems to exist for mostly comedic reasons, closer scrutiny reveals several details that point to a deeper meaning. Firstly, this film is not actually a film at all, but is instead the description of a film being narrated to the camera by a drug-addled British soldier named Osbie Feel. His dialogue describing the film is written in such a way that it blends seamlessly with the prose of the rest of the novel, making it easy for the reader to forget that what they are reading is being spoken to them by a character, and not the narrator of the novel they have become accustomed to. Secondly, “Doper’s Greed” is not intended by Osbie as a bit of idle entertainment, but instead as a coded document that is supposed to impart vital and secret information. Through several astute logical leaps Katje deciphers the film as an allegory for the real-life politics of “The White Visitation” and its staff, which eventually leads her to search for and find the headquarters of the Counterforce, a newly

arisen resistance movement within the Allied military that seeks to oppose the dimly-defined conspiracy at the center of the novel, and includes previously encountered characters such as Osbie Feel, Roger Mexico, and Pirate Prentice.

Before fully extracting the thematic importance held within this brief sequence, two things must first be established: first, that *Gravity's Rainbow* sees itself not as a novel, but as a film, and second, that it shows films as having a special kind of influence over the "real world". The first of these points is revealed only at the very close of the book, after the launch of the 00000 V2 and Gottfried's final descent towards earth in his fiery coffin. It is at this point that Pynchon drops any pretense of narrative diegesis and speaks directly to the reader at the meta level, placing us (along with everyone else who has finished *Gravity's Rainbow*) in a movie theater, watching Gottfried's rocket descend on the screen, before the film flickers a final time and the room goes dark. This is the end of the novel/film we have been reading/watching, but *Gravity's Rainbow* has kept one last secret from its audience. The whole time there has been a rocket rushing through the air, aimed directly at the theater, which in the very last sentence of the book comes crashing through the roof and obliterates us, the audience. It is with this climactic act of violence that the novel finally casts off its disguise and reveals itself to be a film.

Secondly, *Gravity's Rainbow* represents films as being of the utmost importance, and suggests over the course of its narrative the huge potential they have to impact reality. The example of Von Göll has already been discussed, with his megalomaniacal tendencies being even further inflated by the appearance of a real Schwarzkommando

outside the confines of his propaganda film's manufactured reality, leading him to believe that he has the power to affect real life with his films. Though this at first seems to be nothing but the delusion of an artist with an overinflated ego, when taken with other narrative elements, Von Göll's theory about the power of film does not seem quite as ridiculous. One of the most compelling of these comes from the episode centered around Franz Pökler, where he and his wife go to see a film starring Greta Erdmann. Pökler is so attracted to her image on the screen that afterwards when he has sex with his wife, she is in a way only a surrogate for Erdmann. He considers this phenomenon, thinking "How many other men, shuffling out again into depression Berlin, carried the same image back from *Alpdrücken* to some fat drab excuse for a bride? How many shadow-children would be fathered on Erdmann tonight?" (Pynchon, 404). As it happens, Franz impregnates his wife Leni that night and nine months later their daughter Ilse is born, coincidentally around the same time Greta Erdmann has a daughter of her own named Bianca. Though the two girls never meet, there is an implied kinship between them, that somehow Greta's film has tied the two families together, projecting its power off the screen and into the lives of real people. Though this is only one example of many, it demonstrates the regard in which *Gravity's Rainbow* holds film, and Pynchon's belief in the power that cinema has to effect change in the real world.

Once these two pieces of information have been established, it is now possible to place "Doper's Greed" in its full context and analyze its importance to the text. With the added factor of the book's final pages and their revelation of the novel's true form, the

striking similarities between *Gravity's Rainbow* and "Doper's Greed" become clear. Both are films that are not actually films, but are instead the result of narrators loosely describing the events of a movie to an audience, each winding off into seemingly unrelated narrative tangents and musical numbers at the slightest provocation. As alluded to earlier, Osbie Feel's narrative voice is essentially indistinguishable from Pynchon's own, which gives the reader the impression that these two entities may not be as distinct as they seem, especially given some of the items found on Osbie's desk (such as corporate histories and a book about the Herero people), whose contents line up with what we know of Pynchon's own personal interests.

If "Doper's Greed" is taken as a kind of parallel to the text it is contained within, it can help give us a clue as to some of the intention behind *Gravity's Rainbow*. "Doper's Greed" was created by Osbie Feel in order to disperse coded messages to whoever might come across it, which certainly also seems to be one of the many purposes of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Even steering clear of outright conspiracy theory (as just one example, the novel contains several of what appear to be explicit references to Operations Paperclip and MKULTRA, both of which were top-secret government programs that were still hidden from the public at the time of the book's publication), *Gravity's Rainbow* has a clear agenda of disseminating little known or otherwise important information in the hopes of better educating its readership. In it, Pynchon publicizes the Herero genocide, an atrocity committed by Weimar Germany at the beginning of the twentieth century that was virtually ignored at the time, and also delivers coded attacks against the political and economic structures of American society, just as "Doper's Greed" presents

its subtextual assault on the hierarchy of “The White Visitation”. Osbie Feel’s film also has the virtue of leading Katje to the Counterforce, almost as if it were acting as a map to find a movement standing in resistance to power. Likewise, if the novel’s coded messages about the destructive powers of capital and state are taken seriously, the reader will inevitably be led to a position of radical opposition against the current system, the novel having reached into their real life and set them on a new course, just as “Doper’s Greed” did for Katje. Because Pynchon believes in the power art has to mold the shape of reality, *Gravity’s Rainbow* presents its critique of capitalist economics, the American state, and corporate power not for simple academic reasons, or to make its audience despair in the face of overwhelming odds, but instead to inspire its readership to revolution.

The inclusion of “Doper’s Greed”, essentially a version of *Gravity’s Rainbow* in miniature, shows that the novel is quite conscious of its status as art and the ways in which it is capable of making its influence felt in the world. Along with the many other fourth-wall breaking flourishes, this short episode serves to call the reader’s attention to the fact of the novel’s existence as a piece of art and the implications that entails. From the first pages of *Gravity’s Rainbow* there is very little pretense that the book is in any way a reflection of the world as we experience it, or for that matter, a reflection of any kind of objective reality. It is constantly calling attention to its form, defamiliarizing the reader and taking nearly every opportunity it can to distance us from the narrative events and the characters who act them out, the two things we usually hold to be the most important to the workings of a novel. This perceived lack of care given to story and

character is perhaps the most common criticism leveled against Pynchon and his work, and though it may be accurate, it entirely misses the point. By eschewing the traditional modes of novelistic storytelling, the novel forces us to engage with it and evaluate it on a purely artistic level. When the concepts of plot and character as they are conventionally experienced are stripped away, what we are left with is only the artistry of the work, form and theme. Both of these latter two elements of the novelistic medium are heavily emphasized by *Gravity's Rainbow* at the expense of the former two, which forces the reader to engage with the novel not as an avenue for escapism, but as a piece of art deeply concerned with politics. This rejection of the typical form of a novel focuses the reader's attention away from the distractions of conventional story and character and towards the true concerns of *Gravity's Rainbow*, formal experimentation and political message.

However, as alluded to above, this postmodern brand of self-reflexivity does not exist solely for its own sake. By so obviously calling attention to its own form, the novel forces the reader to evaluate it as a piece of political art rather than as a conventionally pleasurable narrative. This, combined with the novel's focus on artistic media as a vector for societal change, begins to build a case for how we are to see the novel's purpose and place within the literary landscape of the twentieth century. With its foregrounding of style and theme, *Gravity's Rainbow* hopes to force its reader to engage more fully with the political concerns detailed within its pages, such as the dangers of state and corporate powers, and the duty of the oppressed to resist their oppressors. By distancing the reader from conventional novelistic forms, Pynchon wants to make us seek meaning

elsewhere in the novel, in the political themes and formal elements that point us away from traditional cultural narratives and towards new and revolutionary ideas.

The importance of form in the case of *Gravity's Rainbow* is also supported by the novel's conception of art as a revolutionary force. As has been discussed previously, *Gravity's Rainbow* points to artistic media (especially film) as a cultural force that can extend its influence past the confines of its form and affect change in the world surrounding it. The novel suggests a duality to this ability, that it can be used both for good and for evil. This is seen most clearly in the character of Von Göll, who makes racialized propaganda films for the Allies in order to prey on the deep-seated fears and bigotries of American and British civilians, yet also tries to help the Argentinians manifest their utopia through his film, though his motives may be rather less pure than theirs. With Von Göll's film about the Schwarzkommando and their subsequent manifestation in reality, the novel makes literal what has always been the case, that propaganda is capable of warping reality to its own ends. In its creation and dissemination, propaganda has the power to mold the subjective realities of those who are exposed to it, especially when it is integrated so fully into daily life (such as through film and entertainment) that it becomes difficult to discern what is propaganda and what is not. With its commitment to flying in the face of dominant narratives and cultural institutions, *Gravity's Rainbow* serves as a kind of anti-propaganda, hoping to use its thematic weight to decondition its reader, to make them question what they have been told and rebel against the system as it stands, and in so doing asserts its power as a piece of art and makes its presence felt in the political world.

This examination of propaganda and anti-propaganda, art versus control, points to a deep thematic current of *Gravity's Rainbow* (and much of the rest of Pynchon's work), an almost dialectic fascination with opposites and the synthesis that is born out of their conflict. This fascination pervades almost every aspect of the text, from the rocket and its dual nature as both saviour and destroyer, the possibilities of art as either liberatory force or cynical scheme, and, of course, anarchy versus control. The novel takes these opposites, as well as many others, and examines the course of their struggle in order to better understand the issues surrounding them and their importance. The most clearly relevant presentation of opposites here is anarchism versus systems of control. The novel spends much of its length struggling against any force that would seek to control it, whether that be conventional literary form, rapacious economic systems, or political oppression. *Gravity's Rainbow* throws its lot in with anarchism and the dispossessed of the world, taking their side in the fight for freedom in the face of the forces that would seek to control them. However, as is the case all throughout the novel, this freedom has its equal opposite in the control it strives against. Though Pynchon stands with the forces of freedom (and seems to want his reader to as well), his diagnosis of the world as it currently stands, as well as the doubt the novel casts on the prospects of anarchism, builds the case for freedom's dialectical opposite, control. Though the novel by no means endorses this counterpoint to freedom, it does present the two forces as being locked in an eternal struggle, each vying to gain dominance over the other, though it suggests that neither will be able to get the upper hand on a permanent basis. The novel posits that our reality is born out of this unending struggle,

that freedom and control will continue their contest in perpetuity, and the only choice that remains to us is which side we take.

With his exploration of both the ideals and practicalities of anarchism, Pynchon begins to define his own political ideology in support of the novel's already extensive critique of contemporary political and economic systems. He sees anarchy not simply as a buzzword, or shorthand for "dangerous", but as an admirable political ideal to be fought for in the face of all odds. The novel follows anarchist dreamers in their quest to establish a new kind of society in the Zone, seeing in their journey both the transcendent possibilities and the potential pitfalls of anarchist organization, with the ultimate fate of their small collective left a mystery by the story's end. It is easy to read this same ambivalence into all of the novel's politics, and an initial interpretation may well even support this conclusion, especially with the novel's apocalyptic tone and its lengthy discussions of inescapable control, societal destruction, and failure. However true these things may be, when the novel's politics are more closely examined it becomes clear that it has, if not a shining hope, then at least a grim determination for revolution, an idea that something must be done before it is too late, even if that something is almost surely doomed to failure. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon presents anarchism as a revolutionary program with the potential to radically disrupt the capitalist order, and deploys the novel's form and belief in the transformative power of art in order to convince his readership of the necessity of anarchist resistance to power. In this novel, Pynchon sees anarchism as an avenue for change that may not be able to permanently

overcome the forces of capital, but one that should be believed in and fought for nonetheless.

## Chapter Four

### *Against the Day* and Developments in Pynchon's Anarchist Thought

In many ways, *Against The Day* seems to be a conscious rethinking of *Gravity's Rainbow*. In his earlier novel, Pynchon paints anarchism as a political ideal to be admired and fought for, but not one that has any real prospect for long-term success beyond a few small and scattered victories. Because of this, *Gravity's Rainbow* ends in a kind of contradiction, with Pynchon trying to incite his readers to a revolutionary fervor, yet simultaneously hinting that there cannot ever be a full victory for anarchism, only an eternal struggle with the forces of control. Despite this pessimistic attitude, Pynchon seems to care deeply for the ideals of anarchism and hopes for their realization in our world. This necessitates a reevaluation of *Gravity's Rainbow's* position on anarchism in *Against The Day*, with Pynchon coming to the issue this time with a larger measure of faith in the methods of anarchism and a greater belief in the potential for its success. Though Pynchon wrote other long and complex works such as *Mason & Dixon*, none of his latter-day novels would come as close to matching the historical scope, thematic depth, and narrative insanity of *Gravity's Rainbow* as *Against the Day* does, making it both an ideological and artistic successor to the previous novel. The nearly 1,100 page novel sprawls from the decades between the Chicago World's Fair to the immediate aftermath of World War One, visiting a multitude of exotic locations and touching the

lives of hundreds of characters along the way. This vast scope is married with deep thematic concerns that run parallel to those found in *Gravity's Rainbow*, including war, mysticism, corporate power, and as always, the unending struggle between freedom and control. *Against the Day* takes these familiar themes and repackages them with newly accessible prose (at least when compared to *Gravity's Rainbow*), an even greater interest in popular genres of American fiction like westerns, and a new historical time period to explore. All of these new trappings stand in service of reimagining the themes of *Gravity's Rainbow* for the twenty-first century, not the least of which is anarchism. Where that previous novel had hidden its treatment of the revolutionary ideology in brief side plots and passages of opaque prose, *Against the Day* puts its anarchist politics front and center, exploring its ideals and implementations in nearly every facet of the novel, from conflicts between miners and mine-owners in the mountains of Colorado, to royal assassins stalking the piazzas of Venice. As in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon exhibits a large measure of sympathy for anarchism, but this time the sympathy comes with a great deal of hope as well. In his later career, it seems that much of the doubt surrounding anarchism has slipped away from Pynchon, and what remains in *Against the Day* is a jubilant rebuke of authority and an embrace of anarchy and anarchists everywhere, whose dreams may no longer be quite so limited by the looming powers of capital and state as they were in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

In the process of writing *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon seems to have written himself into a corner with regards to anarchism. On the one hand, the novel sees the system of anarchist organization as an ideal state of affairs and implores its readers to

join the struggle for freedom, but on the other, it casts doubt on the prospects for the longevity of an anarchist society and suggests that it may be destined to battle against the forces of control for eternity without either side emerging entirely triumphant. These two impulses, the hope for a better future and the fear that it will never come to pass, struggle against each other over the course of *Gravity's Rainbow*, though ultimately it remains up to the reader whether they will embrace the revolutionary message of the novel, or instead succumb to the fear and despair that are equally present within its pages. In many ways *Against the Day* picks up where *Gravity's Rainbow* left off thematically, putting forth a newly invigorated critique of corporate America (this time through the lens of Gilded Age capitalism), and presenting as its equal and opposing force the anarchism of the American proletariat. This anarchist tendency comes into greater focus than it ever did in *Gravity's Rainbow*, with many of *Against the Day's* major characters either identifying themselves as anarchists or having some kind of sympathy for its goals and methods. By placing such a heavy emphasis on anarchy, *Against the Day* seeks to bring to the fore a thematic current that lay beneath the surface of *Gravity's Rainbow*, as well as reevaluate some of the ideas and conclusions presented by that previous novel.

Similarly to *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon begins *Against the Day* from a place of critique. Before putting forth his own ideology, Pynchon hopes to first identify the problems of injustice facing our society, largely centering, as before, on capitalism and the state. However, where *Against the Day* begins to depart from *Gravity's Rainbow* is in the specific focus of this critique. Where the previous novel had explored in depth the

interaction between state and corporation and the destructive effect on society it has, *Against the Day* begins to formulate a more specifically anarchistic critique of the state as its own entity, though of course its intersections with capital are never ignored. The earliest instance of this critique comes early on in the novel, as the Chums of Chance (the airborne adventurers who serve as the central characters for the *Against the Day*'s opening section) tell their newest member about the formation of one of their fellow troupes of balloonists, who got their start during the Siege of Paris. "As the ordeal went on, it became clear to several of these balloonists, observing from above and poised ever upon a cusp of mortal danger, how much the modern State depended for its survival on maintaining a condition of *permanent siege*--through the systematic encirclement of populations, the starvation of bodies and spirits, the relentless degradation of civility until citizen was turned against citizen..."<sup>3</sup>. The state is presented as an entity without care for its people, existing only to serve its own ends and to expand its power and control over the populace. Indeed, it is suggested that this is the only method for perpetuating itself that the state has at its disposal, that it must terrorize its citizens with threats, war, and entrapment in order to keep them under control and itself alive. This line of critique runs quite close to that presented by Giorgio Agamben in his book *State of Exception*, where he describes the manner in which nations create a "State of Exception" where the normal rule of law is suspended in order to combat an amorphous and ill-defined threat, thus placing the citizens even more at the mercy of their rulers. Pynchon describes a similar state of affairs here, with the state manufacturing a set of

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<sup>3</sup> Pynchon, Thomas. *Against the Day*. Vintage Books, 2007. Page 19.

circumstances that put it in total control over its populace in order to accrue even greater power. The novel begins its critique of our society with this identification of the state itself as a witting inhibitor of freedom, signalling a slight departure from the view presented in Pynchon's previous work of the state as little more than a corporate instrument, as well exhibiting a more readily apparent embrace of an anti-state, anarchist philosophy.

Along with this identification of the state as an essential antagonist in the eternal struggle for freedom comes a discussion of what kind of action can threaten the sovereign. *Against the Day* searches for answers to this question all throughout, looking to war, terrorism, and political activism as things that may weaken the stranglehold of a state over its people. One of the earliest answers given by the novel, however, is none of these, as it puts forth the simple existence of unpropertied and stateless people as a major impediment to state authority. In a discussion about anti-semitism and statelessness, a Jewish character named Yitzhak says "Any who live outside property-lines of any scale are automatically a threat to the suburban order and by extension the State. Conveniently, Jews have this history of statelessness...But no Jewish homeland will ever end hatred of the unpropertied, which is a given element of the suburban imperative. The hatred gets transferred to some new target, that's all," (Pynchon, 166). Due to their non-reliance on the apparatus of the state, unpropertied and stateless peoples are stigmatized because they show the subjects of a state that it is possible to exist outside of its restrictive boundaries. If they are not completely demonized and othered by the state, its citizens may come to see that they do not need

to rely on their government, that they can reject it and build a new society for themselves. This idea again returns to Agamben, who writes, “Modern totalitarianism can be defined as the establishment, by means of the state of exception, of a legal civil war that allows for the physical elimination not only of political adversaries but of entire categories of citizens who for some reason cannot be integrated into the political system,”<sup>4</sup>. The novel echoes Agamben’s suggestion, saying that as long as states remain in existence, these stateless peoples will be subject to horrible violence and bigotries due to their inability to be integrated into the ruling system, and the ensuing threat that this poses to dominant power structures. Yitzhak suggests that all the centuries of persecution and brutality the Jewish people have had to endure from European powers has been due to the self-preservation instincts of the state apparatus, that in order to retain its supremacy the state must demonize, and ultimately destroy, all those it cannot control.

Though the novel points to the implicit resistance of stateless people as a major threat to the state, it also looks to more active methods of resistance as ways to disrupt state power. The main form this takes in the novel is that of anarchist political organization and action. (It is interesting to note that in this novel Pynchon nearly always frames resistance to the state and capital in specifically anarchist terms, almost never mentioning communism or other left-wing ideologies). As in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, anarchism is seen as the main end-goal of political action, though *Against the Day* also builds on the concepts of the previous novel in order to point to anarchism in particular

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<sup>4</sup> Agamben, Giorgio. *State of Exception*. Univ. of Chicago Press, 2003. Page 2.

as the most effective mode of resistance to power. Though its page count is much longer, *Against the Day* does not harbor nearly as many doubts about anarchism as *Gravity's Rainbow* does, instead choosing to take the anarchist project more at face value, entirely sympathizing with its goals and exploring its methods and potential outcomes through the eyes of the novel's characters. Pynchon accomplishes this reevaluation by taking threads of anarchist thought present in *Gravity's Rainbow* and resituating them in *Against the Day*, expanding and updating them in order to develop his theories for more positive ends.

One of the major points of continuity and thematic development between *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Against The Day* is their respective treatment of anarchism and its connection to religion. As discussed in the previous chapter, *Gravity's Rainbow* contains an episode where a radical Jesuit priest preaches the necessity of resistance to capitalist powers, and delivers a sermon of anarchism-inflected rhetoric to the denizens of the dreamworld he resides in. However, the content of the sermon is rather despairing in its prognostication about the deathlessness of the bourgeoisie, and his audience wanders away part-way through the sermon, unconverted. By way of contrast, *Against the Day* presents this fusion of anarchy and religion as an incredibly successful one, with several different characters having a conversion to anarchism that is framed in terms of a religious revelation, and an anarchist reverend by the name of Moss Gatlin drawing crowds by the hundred. The connection between religion (specifically Christianity) and anarchism runs deep in *Against the Day*, and lends a more optimistic bent to an idea originally put forth by *Gravity's Rainbow*.

One of the first instances in which the novel makes this connection apparent comes when Lew Basnight, a private detective hired to keep an eye on anarchist subversives, goes to a meeting headed by Moss Gatlin. At first Lew thinks the meeting is being held in an actual church, an assumption that proves to be close to the truth given that it takes on the form of a Sunday service, complete with a congregation and hymns retrofitted to include anarchist messaging. As the last hymn ends, the music moves “from the minor mode it had been in throughout into the major, ending with a Picardy third cadence that, if it did not break Lew’s heart exactly, did leave a fine crack that in time was to prove unmendable...” (Pynchon, 50). After witnessing this display, Lew comes to be more sympathetic to the anarchist cause, and though he continues to investigate them for a time, his sympathies begin to lie more with the anarchists and less with his capitalist employers. Through the simple step of actual contact with those he is told to hate and distrust, Lew comes to realize that anarchists are no more evil or inhuman than he is, that their faith and beliefs are just as valid as the ones he grew up with. In framing the meeting in religious terms by invoking the structure of a classic American Protestant sermon, the novel positions anarchism as a political ideology that engenders faith on a similar order to religion, and moreover, a system of belief with the power to convert nonbelievers when they are exposed to it, despite any of their previous misconceptions or distrust.

This trend of religiously-oriented anarchism continues throughout the novel, appearing once more in the backstory of Webb Traverse, father of several of the book’s central characters and staunch believer in anarchism. *Against the Day* delves into

Webb's younger years, recounting a time when he was caught in the middle of a barroom shootout, miraculously escaping with his life, and later running into Moss Gatlin in the street outside the saloon. The preacher gives Webb a bit of advice and invites him to attend a sermon, which Webb does. The service is typical of Gatlin, biblical verses mixed with anarchist sloganeering and calls to action for the miners and laborers who make up his congregation. After witnessing this display, the young Webb is immediately converted to the cause, and would spend the rest of his life fighting for his union and the rights of workers all across Colorado and the frontier. The novel again frames this conversion in religious terms, saying that "It would almost have been like being born again, except that Webb had never been particularly religious..." (Pynchon, 87). Like Lew Basnight's slowly developing sympathies for the anarchists he is supposed to surveil, Webb's nearly instantaneous conversion to the anarchist cause comes from an exposure to its quasi-religious elements paired with his seemingly supernatural or miraculous escape from the gunfight, almost as if some higher power were saving him for a greater purpose. The novel again draws a connection between anarchism and Christianity, seeing in each the ability to enact transformative change in the lives of nonbelievers and bring new converts to its cause.

Though there are numerous other examples scattered throughout the novel, these two give a succinct overview of *Against the Day's* position on the connection between anarchism and religion, and how this connection differs from that presented in *Gravity's Rainbow*. As was mentioned above, the vision of the fusion of anarchy and religion put forth by *Gravity's Rainbow* is a rather grim one, with its lone proponent

being a solitary Jesuit priest confined to Pirate Prentice's dream, preaching an almost fatalist brand of political resistance to a congregation whose members are prone to wander away at the slightest distraction. However, *Against the Day* gives the relationship between these two concepts a more positive spin, with their marriage creating a hybrid ideology with the power to enact real change in the novel's world. This can be seen specifically in the character of Moss Gatlin, who seems to have an almost supernatural ability to convert people to the anarchist cause, and whose hybrid sermons/political rallies draw and inspire dozens upon dozens of believers. In so clearly drawing a connection between anarchism and Christianity, Pynchon suggests a kind of transcendent quality to anarchy, that this secular political ideology contains a variety of truth usually thought to be reserved solely for religious teachings. In blending the secular and the religious, *Against the Day* questions this assumption and presents anarchism as a movement of both material and spiritual liberation, moving beyond the pessimism of *Gravity's Rainbow* and towards a more hopeful outlook on the prospects of anarchist organization and revolution.

This point of continuity between the two novels has also been noted in other criticism of *Against The Day*, specifically by Graham Benton. Because academic literature on the topic of Pynchon and anarchism is so sparse, Benton is one of the very few to have given the topic an in-depth treatment, which he does in an article titled "Daydreams and Dynamite: Anarchist Strategies of Resistance and Paths for Transformation in *Against the Day*". In it, he briefly situates *Against the Day* in the context of the rest of Pynchon's oeuvre before moving into an analysis of the novel's

anarchist themes, and its methods of delivering them. One of the major thematic currents Benton identifies is the religion-infused version of anarchy that Pynchon describes, in support of the arguments presented above. About Moss Gatlin, Benton writes that his “anarchistic inclinations correspond to James Joll’s characterization of anarchists as those who ‘believe in the possibility of a violent and sudden transformation of society’ precisely because they adhere to a heretical temperament ‘that can often be explained only in terms of the psychology of religious belief,’”<sup>5</sup>. He goes on to write that within this framework “Salvation can occur only when one recognizes and acts upon the evil perpetrated on the working class,” (Benton, 203). Benton further elucidates this ideological cross pollination between anarchism and religion in *Against the Day*, showing how anarchists like Moss Gatlin rely on a religious kind of belief to further their revolutionary ideals and even draw on ideas of Christian salvation to build their new anarchist faith. This effective fusion between the two systems of thought permeates a great deal of *Against the Day*, and represents a clear development from the more fatalist perspective on the blending of the two presented by *Gravity’s Rainbow*.

Benton’s analysis of the novel also tracks and correctly identifies the influence of specific ideological strains on *Against the Day*’s anarchism. Where the treatment of anarchism in *Gravity’s Rainbow* was so buried in subtext and allusion that it was difficult to make out particular ideological positions beyond a commentary on

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<sup>5</sup>Benton, Graham. "Daydreams and Dynamite: Anarchist Strategies of Resistance and Paths for Transformation in *Against the Day*." *Pynchon's Against the Day: A Corrupted Pilgrim's Guide* (2011): 167-190.

anarchism in its most general sense, Pynchon foregrounds his politics in *Against the Day* and as such it becomes much easier to make out the specific anarchist thinkers who had an influence on the novel and its ideological position. Benton identifies one of these as Mikhail Bakunin, the Russian anarchist who emphasized the importance of action and was intimately involved with a number of uprisings all across Europe during his lifetime. Moss Gatlin is once again central to this interpretation of the novel, about whom Benton writes “The preacher’s insistence that one must devote ‘every breath of every day waking and sleeping’ to this cause resonates with Bakunin’s call to arms: ‘Day and night [the revolutionary] must have one thought, one aim--inexorable destruction,’” (Benton, 202). Gatlin calls for constant action against the systems of oppression that govern workers, hoping that in their resistance the lower classes may be able to regain some measure of control over their lives from their masters. As Benton points out, this is a similar stance to that held by Bakunin, who was infamous in his time (and ours) for his apocalyptic rhetoric and total commitment to the revolutionary struggle. Though Moss Gatlin does not entirely endorse the call to aestheticized revolutionary violence so often presented by Bakunin, his theory of action is undoubtedly influenced by the tradition stemming from Bakunin, and his sermons certainly call to mind the fiery rhetorical skills of the Russian revolutionary. Because *Against the Day* is so invested in anarchy as a central theme, it becomes possible to track these specific influences from previous anarchist philosophers, and how Pynchon is able to use their theories to develop the ideological position of his own work.

Even as this anarchist position solidifies over the course of the novel, Pynchon introduces a degree of doubt into the equation, just as he did in *Gravity's Rainbow*. However, instead of focusing on concerns surrounding the limitations of the anarchist revolutionary program, *Against the Day* takes a closer look at the effects that the struggle against injustice has on those who are embroiled in the fight. The novel explores this angle through Webb Traverse, a union activist and one of the most firm believers in the anarchist cause that the reader meets over the course of the narrative. However, Webb is also a family man, and his total commitment to the cause of revolution forces him to push his family obligations to the side in order to continue on in his struggle against capitalist exploitation. Once, when Webb is considering the toll his activism is taking on his personal life, he thinks "If it took growing into a stranger to those kids and looking like some kind of screaming fool when he did show up at home, and then someday sooner or later losing them...that would have to be reckoned into the price, too...Webb would have to set aside his feelings, not just the sentimental baby stuff but the terrible real ballooning of emptiness at the core of his being when he paused to consider all that losing them would mean," (Pynchon, 95). Webb is presented with a choice between sticking close to his family and pursuing revolution, and in the end he chooses the latter. Even though he loves his children, Webb is unable to put aside the drive to resist his oppressors, and so in the end is forced to partially abandon his family in order to pursue his political goals. Though *Against the Day* has moved beyond questions about the viability of anarchism presented by *Gravity's Rainbow*, it does still harbor certain reservations. The novel entirely sympathizes with and endorses the

anarchist program, yet it also acknowledges that a true commitment to revolutionary ideals can often come only at great personal cost.

With *Against the Day*, Pynchon creates a text that operates in dialogue with *Gravity's Rainbow*, taking some of that novel's central themes and expanding on them in order to reorient their conclusions for the political landscape of the twenty-first century. The conclusions drawn by Pynchon in *Against the Day* are much more hopeful than those presented by *Gravity's Rainbow*, as in the more recent novel Pynchon believes with much greater certainty that anarchism has the capacity to defeat the forces of capital and control, in contrast to the more tentative endorsement he gives the ideology in *Gravity's Rainbow*. After more than thirty years, Pynchon returns to the topic of anarchy and radically reevaluates his position on the subject, sympathizing, as he did before, with the aims of anarchism, but now believing wholeheartedly in its prospects for success as well.

## Conclusion

Over the course of his career, Pynchon has created a fully-formed and aesthetically realized anarchist vision, moving from the cynicism and lurking doubt of *Gravity's Rainbow* to the revolutionary passion of *Against the Day*. His early work contains a critique of twentieth century capitalism and authoritarian statecraft whose wide reach is nearly unparalleled in contemporary literature, and though this formulation points to an anti-state and anti-capitalist philosophy, any true commitment to a broader anarchist cause that Pynchon displays in *Gravity's Rainbow* can be guessed at only through inference, due to the text's infrequent and unclear treatment of the political ideology itself. However, as his career developed, Pynchon seems to have rethought this kind of artful obscurity, and by the time of *Against the Day's* publication he writes about anarchism in no uncertain terms, finally revealing his full commitment to the revolutionary cause. In this later novel Pynchon adopts a far more optimistic outlook on the prospects of revolution, more overtly endorsing specific tenets of anarchist thought and developing his own theories through the novel's narrative. Much of the uncertainty shadowing the revolutionary hopes of *Gravity's Rainbow* has disappeared in this shift, with the only lingering doubts being concerned with the huge personal toll a revolution will take on those who participate in it, as opposed to the viability of the movement itself. This ideological development is paired with a modification of Pynchon's aesthetic style, a dual shift that points to a connection between his chosen literary forms and the politics that go along with them.

One of the challenges Pynchon faces in building an anarchist literary project over the course of his bibliography is the difficulty of conveying a fully-formed political ideology through an aesthetic work. Where theoretical texts such as those written by Goldman, Bakunin, or Kropotkin benefit from the ability to overtly state their political positions, elaborate on them, and defend them from the objections of potential detractors, it is much more difficult for a novel to so straightforwardly develop an ideological position. In order to achieve a similar effect, Pynchon diffuses his body of anarchist thought across the entirety of his oeuvre, with *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Against the Day* acting as anchors for each portion of his career as a writer. Pynchon's early work (as exemplified by *Gravity's Rainbow*) is characterized by its difficult prose style, cynicism, and brief yet significant allusions to anarchism that serve to build the philosophical foundation that he would go on to elaborate upon over the course of his career. Even seemingly minor works from Pynchon's early career, such as *The Crying of Lot 49*, contain significant developments to his anarchist literary project, with several side characters ruminating on the possibilities of anarchism, as well as a thematic thread of paranoia and suspicion towards the ruling order running through the novel. Brief invocations of anarchism can also be found in *V.*, Pynchon's debut, showing a clear fascination with the ideology that can be traced all the way back to the beginning of his career, a fascination that would reach its peak in his early work with *Gravity's Rainbow*. As has been discussed previously, this novel took the slim thread of anarchism running through the previous two novels and expanded it far beyond its previous scope, though it continued to remain more obscure than it would be in later novels. Pynchon's early

work establishes his connection to anarchism and begins to build the foundation of his ideological project, with *Gravity's Rainbow* bookending this phase of his career and presenting the most fully formed endorsement and critique of anarchism in his work thus far.

The work of Pynchon's late career takes the anarchism of *Gravity's Rainbow*, expands upon it, and recontextualizes its ideas, much as that novel did for the two preceding it. Even novels without many explicit invocations of anarchism, such as *Mason & Dixon* or *Bleeding Edge*, contain clearly anti-authoritarian themes and do a significant amount of work in adding to the overall political messaging of Pynchon's oeuvre. These works, though they do not display the in-depth treatment of anarchism that several of his other novels do, nevertheless subtly develop many of the thematic currents that Pynchon has been concerned with over the course of his career, such as historical turning points, control, and consequences of the capitalist mode of production, all of which are intimately related to the thread of anarchist theory that runs through his work. However, these subtle developments are not the only thing contained within Pynchon's late work, as *Against the Day* represents the most fully formed and readily apparent treatment of anarchism in his entire literary career. This novel acts as the focal point for Pynchon's latter-day anarchism, its wide narrative scope and thematic range drawing up all the political elements of his post-1990 work and expanding upon them to the point where they become impossible to ignore. In this way, *Against the Day* serves as the ultimate expression of Pynchon's anarchism, rethinking all the work that came before it and expressing a commitment to anarchism that goes far

beyond any of his previous novels. This kind of commentary could not have been achieved without the benefit of retrospect, and as a result, Pynchon's anarchism must be viewed as a continuous development across his whole career. As the decades passed, Pynchon rejected some of his old ideas, expanded upon others, and introduced entirely new ones, meaning that the political themes of one of his novels cannot be fully grasped unless they are viewed in relation to all of his previous and subsequent work. In this way, Pynchon slowly develops his ideas, spreading his contribution to anarchist theory over the whole of his bibliography and thereby necessitating an in-depth study of his entire body of work in order to grasp the totality of his political thought.

This early/late career split in Pynchon's work is also evident in his novels' aesthetic concerns, which change alongside his anarchistic tendencies. His early work is typically dense and allusive, using abstract prose and obscure references to distance the reader from the text and rebel against conventional literary forms. These first three novels employ experimental techniques for both aesthetic and thematic effect, as the confusion engendered by the difficult style is integral to understanding the thematic concerns of these texts, especially *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, which each focus heavily on convoluted central mysteries and the helplessness of their respective main characters. This ambiguity of narrative and prose extends to these early novels' politics as well, as they bury their messaging deep within the text, accessible only to the especially observant or those who are already primed to search out anarchist themes within the novel's pages. However, after his nearly two decade long hiatus from publishing, Pynchon seems to have rethought some of these aesthetic aims, along with

his more pessimistic thoughts on revolution. All of his post-*Gravity's Rainbow* work (with the possible exception of *Mason & Dixon*, which is written in a facsimile of eighteenth-century English) is far easier to read than the novels of his early career, with much clearer prose and an even greater focus on popular culture and genre fiction. Along with this aesthetic clarity comes a readily apparent articulation of Pynchon's politics, with *Against the Day* in particular acting almost as a manifesto that lays out the anarchist politics that had been running silently through much of his previous work. Though this later phase of his career contains many passages of gorgeous prose, Pynchon seems to have made a conscious decision to reign in the pure and beautiful abstraction of his artistic peak, *Gravity's Rainbow*, in lieu of the clarity of message he favors in a novel like *Against the Day*. This aesthetic shift signals a change in his priorities as an author, as his later novels contain a good measure of the experimentation displayed in his early writings, yet also make subtle overtures to a more traditionally understandable prose style in order to allow his readers to more easily grasp the political messaging of his work.

In making these conscious choices around aesthetic form, Pynchon hopes to both expose capitalist ideology to his readership and to inoculate them against it. His decision to employ difficult literary forms, radical politics, and obscure referential material denies cooptation of his work by the capitalist order, meaning that his novels do not simply replicate the ruling ideology of our society, but instead step outside of it, able to critique it freely from an outsider's viewpoint. Pynchon's goal in doing this is to expose the workings of the dominant ideological superstructure to his audience, to

uncover the hidden machinations of the powers that govern their lives. The aesthetic obscurity of his early novels is essential to this mission, as it is only through so completely subverting both conventional literary forms and mainstream politics that Pynchon is able to create something entirely new, a dual artistic and political object that is capable of striking back against the ruling ideology by virtue of existing almost totally outside of its boundaries. This same concern with unveiling ideology continues to be present in Pynchon's later work, though also he goes one step further in his project by answering the call Theodor Adorno puts forth in his book *Aesthetic Theory*, where he writes, "Art respects the masses, by confronting them as that which they could be, rather than conforming to them in their degraded state,"<sup>6</sup>. With *Against the Day* Pynchon does just this, displaying the revolutionary possibilities of anarchism to his audience, using the novel to show us a vision of humanity as we have the potential to be, instead of simply replicating the ruling structures of our society in his art. At varying points in his career, Pynchon has used his chosen aesthetic forms to identify and uncover dominant ideological structures, warn his readership against them, and finally, to show us that a better world is within our grasp.

Pynchon's aesthetic concerns and politics have been nearly inextricable for the entirety of his career. Whether it be the obfuscation and abstraction of his early novels or the relatively welcoming style of his later work, Pynchon has used his chosen artistic forms in order to convey a political message to his readers. At first this message is one that revels in its obscurity, but by his later work, Pynchon eventually comes to a political

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<sup>6</sup> Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic theory*. A&C Black, 1997. Pages 239-240.

position that he presents with a clarity beyond anything in his early writing. As he grows more sure about the viability and righteousness of the anarchist cause, Pynchon shifts his style to put his politics front and center, leaving no ambiguity concerning his position by the time a reader finishes *Against the Day*. He seems to have changed the way he views the purpose of his writing over the years, starting out with a view of aesthetic merit as the most important aspect of a novel, but later coming to a middle ground where artistic accomplishment and political messaging are equally essential. Though it would be incorrect to assert that Pynchon ever completely abandons the artful abstraction of his early work, his later novels, such as *Against the Day*, employ a far more readable style in order to accommodate the clarity that Pynchon now wishes to treat his political themes with, and as such, the effect of his work is greatly changed from one phase of his career to the other. With this shift, Pynchon reevaluates the aesthetic and political aims of his early writing and signals, at last, his total commitment to the anarchist cause.

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