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Redeeming the Loss of Being: Ontology and Possibility in Thomas Pynchon's Later Novels

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Redeeming the Loss of Being: Ontology and Possibility in Thomas Pynchon's Later
Novels

By

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Abstract

This thesis takes up two novels written by Thomas Pynchon, and attempts gain a better understanding of how these two novels pose, reframe and resolve questions concerning existence in a postmodern era. Characterized by a loss of tangible meaning, uncertainty, and ever-increasing variability, the postmodern period has forced artists to define large philosophical concepts such as being, knowledge, and understanding without the sensibilities which grounded bygone eras. *Mason & Dixon* and *Against the Day*, both novels by Thomas Pynchon, take up the question of being in an uncertain time, and offers a reconceptualization of the political responsibilities of the individual in the postmodern era.

Preface

The change in sensibility that has occurred since the second World War has been called (by the critics, authors and artists that have attempted to describe it), the postindustrial era, the late capitalist era, and the postmodern era. Loosely stated, the shift towards the postmodern has brought a greater sense of uncertainty, a broader concept of how meaning can be retained or lost in language, art, or everyday understanding. Of the artists operating under the umbrella of the postmodern, Thomas Pynchon is one of the most accomplished. In a career that spans the latter half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty first, Pynchon has written eight novels of various lengths. The literary critical community considers four of these novels, *V.*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Mason & Dixon*, and *Against the Day*, to be of greater depth and intention than the other, more lighthearted works. Despite the continued attention to a stable of themes throughout his career, Pynchon's thinking concerning the postmodern era has matured and changed over time, creating a distinct break between the earlier and later novels. *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow* represent a postmodernity which has not yet defined the problems which plague it, and generally do not present any solutions to the concerns of the post-war era. The later two novels, *Mason & Dixon*, and *Against the Day*, begin to answer the questions of meaning, knowledge, being, and the individual's place in postmodern society.

The break between Pynchon's earlier and later novels is by no means concrete, but in the absence of a clear extra-textual indication by the author, the novels must speak for

themselves. One of the points on which the novels are clearest is the question of being in the postmodern era. Ontology, or the philosophical discipline which studies the question of being, is central to Pynchon's later works. As the two chapters which follow will argue, one of Pynchon's primary thematic and artistic concerns has become to articulate an ontology for the postmodern era. Because postmodern theory from Havel to Hassan has predicated its understanding of postmodernism on general movement away from large, overarching ideas such as "Truth," "Justice," or "Knowledge," and toward more limited and localized concepts of the same, the project of creating a definition for being, as such, in the postmodern era is gargantuan.

Mason & Dixon and *Against the Day* address ontology to redeem the supposed loss of the "big ideas" to uncertainty and indeterminacy. That is, Pynchon's novels attempt to make the uncertainty of the postmodern era a positive and constructive force. In this sense, what was formerly "indeterminacy" and "loss," the novels convert to "possibility," and "deeper understanding." The arena for this conversion is in questions of being— what does it mean to exist?, what kinds of things are? What does it mean to have a world? What does it mean to say that things exist in a world?— and so on.

I argue in the first chapter that the narrative of *Mason & Dixon* is given to projection and internal disagreement, creating a type of subjunctivity which then bleeds into an ontology that the novel presents to the reader. This way of being is necessarily redemptive for Pynchon, because it represents a political responsibility toward potential futures.

The second chapter takes up the question of Luddism in *Against the Day*, and in

so doing argues that the distrust of technology and impulse towards anarchism which are both present in the novel speak to an ontology which is again characterized by possibility. Being, in *Against the Day* becomes a way to release oneself from the negative uncertainty of the postmodern era.

Pynchon's ontology, as I have articulated it in these chapters, is a way of understanding being as potentially fruitful, intentional activity. The choice to live, to exist, in a certain way determines a future which makes the world at once more livable and less under the control of deleterious forces.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

I Subjunctive and Narrative Space: Definitions and Example

Thomas Pynchon's 1973 novel *Gravity's Rainbow* has established him as a paradigmatic postmodernist author and cemented his position as part of the contemporary canon. Pynchon's 1997 novel *Mason & Dixon* continues many of the themes that occur and recur in earlier novels such as *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49*. At the center of the narrative are Charles Mason, an astronomer, and Jeremiah Dixon, a surveyor, who together observe the 1761 Transit of Venus to measure the parallax angles between that planet and Earth and subsequently survey a line to mark the border between the colonies of Maryland and Pennsylvania. The novel focuses on the day-to-day existence of Mason and Dixon as they find themselves at a crux in the history of what would presently become the United States. The imaginative rendering of a "subjunctive" history squarely establishes *Mason & Dixon* as a postmodern novel. In this chapter, I argue that the subjunctive narrative fosters a postmodern ontology that represents Pynchon's attitude towards history. In Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*, fictive historiography creates a sense of radical contingency. To exist, for the novel's narrative and characters, is to negotiate uncertainty.

A subjunctive narrative is an elaboration of the grammatical subjunctive, a verbal mode that conveys a sense of doubt or uncertainty. In many languages, notably Spanish,

French, or German, the subjunctive mode is encoded in verb inflection. The Spanish infinitive verb “hablar,” meaning “to speak,” can be conjugated, for example, to the first person present indicative “hablo.” The subjunctive is “hable,” signifying “I may speak.” The quality of uncertainty encoded within the subjunctive allows the speaker to articulate possibility, desire, uncertainty, and negation. In the English language, such verbal inflection is commonly accompanied by modals such as “may,” “might,” and “maybe.” Pynchon's subjunctive narrative technique finds its roots in notions of storytelling rather than in inflectional endings. The critical field of narratology has developed some methodology for understanding how the subjunctive can be created within and influence a given work. Martin Fitzpatrick's article “Indeterminate Ursula and 'Seeing How It Must Have Looked,' or 'The Damned Lemming' and Subjunctive Narrative in Pynchon, Faulkner, O'Brien, and Morrison” forwards several theories about the creation of the subjunctive in narrative form. Capitalizing on Gerald Prince's term “the disnarrated,” Fitzpatrick writes, “It is action that does not occur within the narrative yet is narrated. That is, it is not part of the story, i.e. the set of events which is recounted by the discourse, yet it is narrated within the discourse.” He continues: “The disnarrated explores the forking paths of counterfactuals, wishes, and unfulfilled possibility” (248). Thus the subjunctive narrative mode is that which cannot be included by the writer within the world of the main narrative. In this respect subjunctive narrative is an act of creative projection, which inhabits the textual conventions of the primary diegetic level but does not necessarily follow the logic of that level. One faults this definition because it

presupposes that events within the narrative do not follow its internal logic. For example, if Sherlock Holmes and John Watson, in one of Conan Doyle's "Sherlock Holmes" stories board a transatlantic flight to New York, the deliberate anachronism would destabilize the narrative to such an extent that the world of the story would become implausible and fall into subjunctivity.

Fitzpatrick see such paradox as an essential aspect of unstable or variable stories: "Disruption of the story-discourse relation is finally the constituent feature of subjunctive narrative" (257). In "*Mason & Dixon in the Zone, or, a Brief Poetics of Pynchon-Space,*" Brian McHale observes a spatial element to that which is qualitatively uncertain: "This counterfactual hypothesis empowers the narrative to project a series of subjunctive spaces" (45). It is appropriate to consider these spaces to be endemic to the narrative and the "real" basis for the events or spaces that are excluded. This produces the same separation of story and discourse as any other instance of subjunctivity.

The question of what is true and false in a subjunctive narration becomes less important than what the various narrators and narrative figures of the work want to be true or false. The result is a form of storytelling which depends not on the faithful relation of plot-lines or characterization but on the wishes, desires, dreams and counterfactual events within the mind of the characters, author, and narrator. Thus, subjunctivity occurs at different narrative levels and has different effects at each level. Many of the examples from Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* occur within its frame, others occur in the internal story of the two surveyors, while still others find their root in the external, implied narrator.

We can initiate our examination of the subjunctive in *Mason & Dixon* with one of its seminal moments:

Does Britannia, when she sleeps, dream? Is America her dream?— in which all that cannot pass in the metropolitan Wakefulness is allow'd Expression away in the restless Slumber of these Provinces, and on West-ward, wherever 'tis not yet mapp'd, nor written down, nor ever, by the majority of Mankind, seen,— serving as a very Rubbish-Tip for subjunctive Hopes, for all that *may yet be true...* (345)

This passage provides readers and critics with an understanding of how Pynchon approaches the subjunctive in the novel. Here, the term “Rubbish-Tip” is the pivotal descriptor with respect to America on the one hand, and the subjunctive on the other. Pynchon's term seems to reveal his politics; certainly his narrator implies a reproach to British colonialism. The “subjunctive Hopes” to which Pynchon refers are fabulous loci: the “Earthly Paradise, Fountains of Youth,” and so on that represent only European fantasy. These places had their roots in specific cultural mythologies of other, faraway lands. The Spanish exploration of the Central and North American continent sought to convert the native population as well as to search for the Fountain of Youth. The passage also mentions myths such as the Kingdom of Prester John, a supposed Christian realm in the far East. These mythologies allow the reader to connect Pynchon's subjunctivity to a long tradition of mythology and cultural projection.

The second major instance of subjunctivity in *Mason & Dixon* is the sequence in

which the narrator projects the possibility that Mason and Dixon might continue westward, past the farthest point of Maryland and Pennsylvania:

One late Autumn, instead of returning to the Coast, the Astronomers will just decide to winter in, however far west it is they've got to... and after that, the ties back in to Philadelphia and Chesapeake will come to mean that much less, as the Pair, detach'd at last, begin consciously to move west. The under-lying Condition of their Lives is quickly established as the Need to keep, as others a permanent address, a perfect Latitude. (706-707)

This passage continues to document the fantastic and impossible contained in a projected “West,” moving out of the indicative and into a realm of possibility within the text. The primary level of narration is that of Rev. Wicks Cherrycoke. The reader is conscious, however, that behind him is a farther removed, more omniscient, narrator. This sequence is not a part of the surveyors' narrative because Pynchon does not reference it later, when their tale comes back into focus. Readers must accept the sequence as an episode imposed upon them by the text.

In the above passage, uncertainty happens at the level of omniscience and as a result creates a definite understanding of the way in which active projection on the part of the narrator can be an element in forming subjunctivity. Fitzpatrick's article tracks the way Quentin Compson and his roommate invent the story of Compson's ancestor within William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* As the characters project their story, the omniscient narrator adopts their version of events and their invention becomes accepted

truth within the world of the novel. In *Mason & Dixon*, the figure that relates the frame of the novel tells a story which differs from the inner tale. In both *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Mason & Dixon* these storytellers separate the discourse from the story itself and in so doing create a narrative space in which anything is possible, i.e. the subjunctive.

A major effect of this subjunctive element is a shift in the novel's mood. As a result, the omniscient narrator often changes the sequence of events, making ostensibly “actual” occurrences ambiguous, overriding the narrative world of the characters. Such confusion of the levels of narrative gives the reader a way to understand the multivalent qualities of subjunctivity, as the narrator, as well as each character, struggles to create a “reality,” however provisional.

Brian McHale has argued that *Mason & Dixon* is replete with subjunctive spaces, complementing narrative that is tentative, even contradictory, perpetuating a sense of uncertainty within the novel. McHale further argues that American spaces, especially the Western part of Pynchon's America, are by definition plural and uncertain. McHale draws his argument from the previous quotation, as Mason and Dixon continue the line westward in a hypothetical projection of the story. What is notable about McHale's claim is his insistence that the subjunctive spaces of the novel foment a particular sense of being. Thus they give the reader an understanding of Pynchon's ontology.

The treatment of Pynchon's narrative in William Plater's *The Grim Phoenix* has become a major basis for critics' understanding of space and movement in works before and after *Mason & Dixon*. Plater writes that the places of Pynchon's novels are inhabited

by the characters in a similar manner to tourists inhabiting destinations, as mere functions of the existence of those places, or in other words, as entities whose being is solely focused within a given locale (Plater 91). Such a concept of being applies to Mason & Dixon's spaces, both real and fantastic. At their first incursion into South Africa, the narrator relates Mason and Dixon's relationship to that place:

Trying to remember how they ever came to this place, both speak of Passage as by a kind of flight, all since Tenerife, and the Mountain slowly recessional, having pass'd like a sailor's hasty dream between Watches, as if, out of a sea holding scant color, blue more in name than in fact, the unreadable Map-scape of Africa had unaccountably emerg'd, as viewed from a certain height above the pale Waves,— tilted into the Light, as a geometer's Globe might be pick'd up and tilted for a look at this new Hemisphere, this haunted and *other* half of ev'rything known... (58)

The language of the Baedeker guide that Plater describes shines through in this passage: “Map-scape,” “Globe,” and even “a look at this new Hemisphere.” Mason and Dixon are foreign to this place, and cannot conceive of it as a space of habitation. The sense of alienation in this passage figures in much of the novel. The characters themselves allude to this sense of anomie in their dialogue: “And yet, d'ye not feel sometimes that ev'rything since the Fight at sea has been,— not a Dream, yet...” and “We might have died then, and gone on as Ghosts. Haunting this place, waiting to materialize, - perhaps just at the moment of the Transit, the moment the Planet herself becomes

solid...” (75). With the mention of dreams and ghosts, we can see here straightforward markers of an imaginary real, yet to call these absolute signals of subjunctive narrative is problematic. The reader cannot trust that the narrator generates the subjunctivity of the passage. What Pynchon seems to suggest is that the characters themselves inhabit a subjunctive zone, which is to say that they cannot belong to the place in which they find themselves: they are separated by virtue of their nationalities and their ways of being.

This same sense of otherworldliness obtains later in St. Helena, to which Mason repairs after his sojourn in South Africa to observe the transit of Venus: “A very small town clings to the edge of an interior that must be reckoned part of the Other World” (107). The narrator's description of St. Helena places an emphasis on a sense of uncertainty and foreignness, which in turn foments subjunctivity in the text: “Did he choose more prudently, to escape to the Heights, he might, from above, squinting into spray whose odor and taste are the life of the sea, behold a Company of Giant rob'd Beings, risen incalculably far away over the Horizon”(108). The subjunctivity of this description places an emphasis on potentiality and possibility while remaining focused on physical space. The textual space of St. Helena predicates and maintains a condition of uncertainty in which the clouds become robed beings with a mysterious intelligence. It is the space itself which delineates these entities. Without the place of St. Helena, the clouds would simply be clouds.

Subjunctive space in *Mason & Dixon* creates the impression of glancing off the surface of a place. As the feeling of uncertainty and confusion increases in the reader, the

novel becomes more subjunctive. The narrator's asides, which create Pynchon's sense of subjunctivity, are most prevalent in the earlier part of the novel. Their collective impact on the reader accretes as the story continues, making increasingly apparent the degree to which subjunctivity affects the characters. When, late in the novel, Dixon relates a dream- experience in which he visits the interior of the earth, Pynchon's narrative moves toward a subjunctive extreme, challenging the reader to navigate especially uncertain waters. In this sequence the uncanny quality of the subjunctive space returns: "In a larger sense, then, to journey anywhere, in this *Terra Concava*, is ever to ascend" (740). The denizens of this zone thus reinforce the fragility of their territory, a fragility which depends on the indeterminacy of the zone itself: "Once the necessary Degrees are measur'd and the size and weight and shape of the Earth are calculated inescapably at last, all this will vanish" (741). The place that Pynchon describes is on tenuous ground; discovering and articulating the previously unknown will destroy a subjunctive zone such as the Interior.

The dream sequence in which Dixon visits the "interior of the earth" reveals that Mason and Dixon can experience their own tenuousness in the form of dreams. From dreams the characters' experience of being becomes apparent. Moments of possibility and uncertainty bring to the foreground a mood which extends through the narrative, giving even the most basic and ordinary sequences a fantastic quality. Subjunctive narrative does not always predicate sequences such as these; the discourse of the story in the above passage is not separate from the diegetic level of the narrative. During Dixon's dream

sequence Pynchon gives no clue that it is a fantasy or dream relevant to the narrative space of the American colonies. Dixon's story *is* the discourse. The space itself, while rife with the ontological state of the contingency, is not itself rendered by subjunctive narrative.

The variability of space, then, makes the narrative subjunctive. The sequence contains no verbal markers of uncertainty or projection, only events and the actions of the characters. Dixon tells not what happened to a mass of persons, but what happened to him specifically. The label of subjunctive narrative applies because Dixon's experience, real or false, disagrees with a commonly held notion of the solidity of the Earth. The narrative contains subjunctive qualities, but none that other characters, particularly Mason, can perceive: “Ah.– Can Dixon see the Apprehension in his Face?” and “Mason sits rhythmically inserting into his Face an assortment of Meg Bland's Cookies, Tarts, and Muffins,... pretending to be silent by choice, lest a phrase emerge too farinaceously inflected” (738, 739). Mason's embarrassment creates a black conversational space onto which Dixon projects an entire experience, related in the narrative, that is entirely subjective. The lack of communication between these two characters allows Pynchon to emphasize the highly personal, and highly variable, nature of subjunctive space.

These encounters with being and uncertainty in *Mason & Dixon* bring a sense of tenuous ontology to Pynchon's novel, forcing the reader to accept a less verifiable narrative world. These instances of world breakdown in *Mason & Dixon* have a major effect on the themes of the novel and allow more complete investigation of subjunctive

ontologies.

II The Subjunctive Predicates a Postmodern Ontology

Mason & Dixon articulates a state of ontological instability, or subjunctivity through its epistemological structure. Pynchon's characters find the world around them either shadowed or completely inscrutable, qualities which in turn bleed back into the novel's ontology: what objects, beings, and worlds actually are. Early in the section of the novel set in South Africa, Mason has a dream in which a hooded figure with a knife approaches him with murderous intent. Concerned with the way Mason screams upon waking, the surveyors' host families send him to see the wise man of the town. The narrator comments of the Afrikaners' "belief that the world they inhabit in their Dreams is as real as their waking one" (70). Here, the process of subjunctive blending into the "real" world causes the reader to doubt the concreteness of that world. The current, ostensible world is colored by what I would like to term a "shadowing," which stems from Pynchon's language, casting objects, people, and events in an otherworldly light, contrasting against and de-centering the reality of the objects, people and events portrayed in Pynchon's text.

Uncertainty influences *Mason & Dixon* influences entire episodes in *Mason & Dixon*, coloring them with subjunctivity. For example, when Mason is on the island of St. Helena collecting data for the Royal Society of England after the transit of Venus, weather comes to block the observations: "It is thus with some surprize and a keen rectal Pang that his leisurely Gaze now *does* detect something out there, and quite large, too,

that should not be, –a patch of Nothing” (133). Though it is a cloud bank that Mason has seen, his notion that there is nothing where there should be something, places that mysterious entity into the subjunctive narrative mode. Because the narrator starts to project what should be but isn't, the Nothing becomes enshrined in a conditional state—were the world to be as it should, Mason would in fact have perceived nothing.

This shifting conditionality is seen not only in spaces, but also in objects and characters in *Mason & Dixon*. In Cape Town, Mason observes “the Fabulators of Grub-Street, a licentious night-world of Rakes and Whores, surviving only in memories of pleasure, small darting winged beings untrustworthy as remembrancers” (110). Note here that the rakes and whores more fully become “small darting winged beings.” Instead of comparison by simile or metaphor, these figures find their true natures in Pynchon's description. These shadowed, liminal figures belong more fully in the narrative than their unshadowed referents. As the liminal figures overtake the reality of the novel, the narrative falls into an uncertain ontological state.

The ambiguous tension in *Mason & Dixon* between shadow and reality is never more intelligible than in the episode in which Mason's dead wife Rebekah visits him during his time on St. Helena. Rebekah's ghost unifies the subjunctivity of space and narrative within the novel: the reader cannot be sure whether Mason's vision originates in the conditions on the stark island or in the exigencies of Pynchon's narrative. Driven nearly insane by the continuous wind on St. Helena, Mason starts to realize that he can hear his wife's voice therein: “Rebekah, who in her living silences drove him to moments

of fury, now wrapt in what should be the silence of the grave, has begun to speak to him.” She appears in a ghostly form: “The Moonlight insists she is there” (164). After speaking with Mason, she disappears, leaving Mason to question whether there might be “other Modalities of Appearance” (165). Mason's loss of concrete reality gives the narrative a subjunctive quality which in turn destabilizes it and places anything contained within it under a pall of uncertainty.

These episodes resemble many theoretical treatments of postmodernity, including those of Jean-François Lyotard's 1979 text *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, which makes the argument that “scientific” ways of thinking common since the Enlightenment come into conflict with the more traditional “narratives” which previously founded everyday understandings. According to Lyotard, scientific knowledge bases itself on the rhetorical foundation of narrative: “In this context, the only role positive knowledge can play is to inform the practical subject about the reality within which the execution of the prescription is to be inscribed . . . Knowledge is no longer the subject, but in the service of the subject: its only legitimacy (though it is formidable) is the fact that it allows morality to become reality” (Lyotard 36). Lyotard's analysis claims that scientific thought's constitutive law is that “one language game, denotation, be retained, and all others excluded”(Lyotard 25).

Pynchon articulates in *Mason & Dixon* a version of subjunctivity that pertains to possibility: “back into the Net-Work of Points already known, that slowly triangulates its Way into the Continent, changing all from subjunctive to declarative, reducing

Possibilities to Simplicities that serve the ends of Governments” (345). The subjunctive, as a condition of possibility, functions in the novel as a marker of all that is lost during Mason and Dixon's expedition, including the potential futures of the United States, the Native American territories, the Civil War, and even the relationship between Mason and Dixon. The historical Mason-Dixon expedition concerned the settlement of a border dispute between the colonial owners of Maryland and Pennsylvania. In settling the dispute, Mason and Dixon impose borders on a formerly borderless land, a type of demarcation, or closing off, which reflects Lyotard's idea that the rational Enlightenment-era methodologies exist only to capture existing narratives, not to disclose new ones. In this respect the subjunctive serves as part of a very postmodern critique of the method and ideology that science has imposed upon the as yet undiscovered parts of the world. Faced with the narrative that is often in the service of science, Lyotard argues that twenty- first- century culture replaces story-telling with science, thereby delegitimizing the non-scientific elements of that culture (Lyotard 39). The outcome of such replacement is the renewed focus on the recovery of subjective experience: “Most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative. It in no way follows that they are reduced to barbarity. What saves them from it is their knowledge that legitimation can only spring from their own linguistic practice and communicational interaction” (Lyotard 40). The inherently subjective quality of subjunctive, uncertain narrative forces the perceivers to accept the truth of their experience, because there is no concrete, external framework through which to understand their perception.

Phenomenological perception becomes progressively more obvious as Mason and Dixon prepare to leave on their journey Westward: “‘Tis the Age of Reason, rrrf? There is ever an Explanation at hand, and no such thing as a Talking Dog” (22). Pynchon's habit of including fantastic and humorous episodes in his novels forces the reader to suspend his or her belief in the ability of science and the “Age of Reason” to interpret and explain the world. Though such a realization does reinforce the most obvious themes of the novel– the failure of Enlightenment ideologies, and the battle of possibility and known reality– it also brings to light the exigencies of fiction itself. Pynchon seems to question the possibilities of both the textual and fictive mediums. As a result, the narrative pushes at the limits of *Mason & Dixon* as a novel and as a textual artifact.

The experiences of the mysterious within *Mason & Dixon* are contingent upon the experience of a given reality. As I argued previously, disagreement between several subjective experiences of an event foregrounds the subjunctivity of that event. As Mason and Dixon proceed farther West, beyond the last settlements of Pennsylvania and into Ohio, they find themselves caught in a world filled with subjunctive possibility. The spaces which Brian McHale highlights in the article cited previously are significant in that they foster a sense of uncertainty and paranoia. Later in the novel, as Mason and Dixon proceed westward, they start to become aware of figures whose existence is unclear: the “Mechanickal Duck,” the “Golem,” and the “Black Dog.” These fictive elements lead Mason and Dixon to become uncertain of being itself. When one of their party glimpses a “Black Dog” in the woods, Pynchon's characters must grapple with both

the epistemological and ontological implications: “ 'May I suggest that this is all but a form of Joint Mirage,' offers the Rev'd, 'something very like having been reported in the Philosophical Transactions not long ago as you recall?'” (494). Such visions recall the relationship of many of Pynchon's characters to the paranoid viewpoint.

Pynchonian paranoia, in works such as *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, is the propensity to see things as linked, whether or not they are objectively connected. As William Plater writes in *The Grim Phoenix*, “Pynchon bases his uses of the paranoia metaphor precisely on uncertainties, because both the ambiguity and the more specific implications of uncertainty relations nourish paranoia and make psychosis difficult to establish clinically” (189). This active paranoid force is present in moments both small (“Who is unique? Who is not own'd by someone? What do any of their desires matter if they can be of no use to the Maneuver” [551]) and grandiose moments (“In an Onset of Turning-Evil, Mason imagines the Streets full of Row-Houses multiplying like loaves and fishes, whirling past like spokes of a Giant Wheel, whose Convergence or Hub, beyond some disputable Prelude to Radiance, he cannot make out” [700]). The condition of possibility in which Mason and Dixon find themselves forces them to make connections and to formulate the “little narrative,” which is the defining mode of knowledge for the postmodern era (Lyotard 60).

The conditions of possibility and knowledge which the subjunctive imposes upon the characters motivate a move into a postmodern form of knowledge. I argue that such a shift can create a postmodern condition of being. Brian McHale, in *Postmodernist*

Fiction, writes that works which possess an “epistemological dominant” belong to literary Modernism, just as those dominated by ontological concerns should be interpreted as postmodern works: “typical postmodernist questions bear either on the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world which it projects” (McHale 10). Given that postmodern texts concern themselves with questions of existence, the interaction of subjunctive narrative and subjunctive space in *Mason & Dixon* creates a point of reference for the reader to understand how Pynchon's novel presents an ontology. Narrative and space come together in the phenomenon of “shadowing,” described previously, as well as in the asides in which Pynchon actively projects worlds in the novel. One of these moments comes as the narrator tells of Mason and Dixon's westward continuation of the Line, creating, in subjunctive narrative, a future for Mason and Dixon:

Were the Visto to've cross'd the Warrior Path and simply proceeded West, then upon that Cross cut and beaten into the Wilderness, would have sprung into being not only the metaphysickal Encounter of Ancient Savagery with Modern Science, but withal a civic Entity, four Corners, each with its own distinguishable Aims.
(650)

The world Pynchon imagines in this passage reflects a postmodern reality independent from the narrative as it exists throughout most of the novel. McHale's

distinction between epistemological and ontological dominants allows readers to interpret such worlds within *Mason & Dixon* as situations in which questions of ontology become paramount. Following McHale's distinction, questions of worlds and the nature of being itself fall under the critical heading of postmodernity. When Pynchon projects worlds that escape the main narrative track of the novel, their uncertain existence creates a new way of thinking about narrative and being. Thus do shadowing and projection predicate a postmodern ontology in the novel.

Aside from the shadowing aspect of subjunctive narrative, the qualities which allow it to be such a salient part of Pynchon's novel are those of possibility. Adam Lifshy, in "Bordering the Subjunctive in Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*," notes that "Subjunctive America, the antithesis of declarative imperialism, is that unmapped and atemporal space where alternative possibilities yet abound, where plural local realities exist side by side, a culturally creative place that is distinct from, and there for resistant to, the imperial cartography imposed upon the new world" (6). Despite Lifshy's insistence on politicizing the subjunctive in the novel, continuous projective possibility is essential for raising questions of existence. As the characters find themselves lost in the possibility and indeterminacy of the narrative world, they must retrieve their viewpoints from the totalizing ideology of "imperial cartography." It is this reclamation that Pynchon argues is the essential quality of a postmodern ontology.

The phenomenological, that is, first-person or subjective viewpoint is vital for *Mason & Dixon*'s process of world-creation. Such a point of view gives the characters in

Pynchon's novel a framework for understanding their environments, despite the ideologies that have been imposed upon them. What is more, the influence of the subjunctive upon this subjective perspective throws it into a condition of possibility. Take for example a minor character in the novel: Mr. Knockwood. Encountered by Mason and Dixon in an inn during the dead of winter, he spends his time “studying... the passage of Water across his land, and constructing elaborate works to divert its flow” (364). Mr Knockwood explains: “all that has to happen is some Beaver, miles upstream from here moves a single Pebble,– suddenly, down here, everything's changed! The creek's a mile away running through the Horse Barn!”(364). This character describes the condition of possibility that the subjunctive indicates. Mr. Knockwood understands his world through the channeling and diverting of water, and through that system also understands that it might change based on something as inconsequential as a pebble. Even for such a minor character, a personal, phenomenological basis for understanding and existing is vital.

At this point in the story, Mason and Dixon come across a French chef, Armand, who is romantically pursued by a “meckanical Duck,” which moves so quickly as to be invisible, and only makes its presence known through strange and disparate signs (380). The Duck marks an uncertainty which applies only to Armand, wherever he may be. The condition of possibility that such indeterminacy creates obtains for this character alone, and exemplifies a subjunctive ontology in that it is a way of being that depends on the shadowed, subjunctive figure of the “meckanical Duck.” The variability and uncertainty of Armand's situation, as well as the nature of the Duck's ontological status make this

narrative aside into an articulation of Pynchon's postmodern ontology.

Section III: The Subjunctive as the Political

Throughout *Mason & Dixon*, Pynchon presents a critique not only of the Enlightenment ideology which pervades the subtext of the novel, but of the ideology of American expansionism, rooted in the European practice of colonialism. There are several points where this critique stands clear in the novel as a whole. The idea of diametrically opposed subjunctive and declarative ontologies, as well as Captain Zhang and his mortal enemy Zarpazo, are primary examples of Pynchon's philosophico-political critique. These, in combination with other moments in the text, foment a sense of foreboding for the role the Line will come to have in American history. In the present section, I contend that this sense of foreboding constitutes Pynchon's political critique.

The central passage in the novel with respect to all subjunctivities is a monologue in the voice of the narrator concerning the possibilities of the incipient American nation:

Does Britannia, when she sleeps, dream? Is America her dream?— in which all that cannot pass in the metropolitan Wakefulness is allow'd Expression away in the restless Slumber of these Provinces, and on West-ward, wherever 'tis not yet mapp'd, nor written down, nor ever, by the majority of Mankind, seen,— serving as a very Rubbish-Tip for subjunctive Hopes, for all that *may yet be true*,— Earthly Paradise, Fountain of Youth, Realms of Prester John, Christ's Kingdom, ever behind the sunset, safe till the next Territory to the West be seen and recorded, measur'd and tied in, back into

the Net-Work of Points already known, that slowly triangulates its Way into the Continent, changing all from subjunctive to declarative, reducing Possibilities to Simplicities that serve the ends of Governments... (345).

Here Pynchon outlines his understanding of how the subjunctive formulates a political understanding of history. The “simplicities that serve the ends of Governments” at first glance are the borders drawn on maps, which delineate the world as institutions and governments would have it, while the “Possibilities” to which he refers are, by definition, less clear. Adam Lifshey argues that Pynchon's vision of America as a continental entity is a mere possibility, an “ontological alterity” (8). Considering the as yet unformed nation portrayed in the novel an alterity incorporates those peoples and otherworldly creatures into a set of entities destroyed by the deleterious forces of an ideology which sees the land and its inhabitants as only resources to be optimized in order to maximize a profit. This ideology, apparent in the novel, influences the practices of colonialism and expansionism.

As such, Pynchon's postmodern ontology has ethical implications for an undertaking such as the Mason-Dixon Line. Captain Zhang, who appears later in the duo's American sojourn, emphasizes that the Line has an ethical dimension in its determination of borders and closing off of possibilities. A “geomancer” by trade, Zhang objects to the placing of a straight line over the land: “To mark a right Line upon the Earth is to inflict upon the Dragon's very flesh” (542). The feng shui philosophy to which

Zhang subscribes posits that the landscape takes its form from a Dragon, and the Line fails to honor the natural boundaries of the earth. As a result, the idea of a prescription of a border by the Mason-Dixon survey is anathema to Zhang. The Line which Zhang hates so much is not only the boundary between Maryland and Pennsylvania, but the line drawn on a map which destroys, in the process of defining that space, the ways of being within the land that it marks: “impossible for any who live out here the year round to see as anything other than hateful Assault” (542). For Pynchon, it seems, the creation of the Mason-Dixon line marks a turning point from a condition of being which incorporates possibility, natural rhythm, and well-being, into a condition of being based upon the rigid system of rule-based existence.

The historical moment in which Pynchon sets *Mason & Dixon* is central to his understanding of the expeditions undertaken by the famous pair. From the doubts of the astronomers themselves to the uncanniness which invades the 1756 expedition, Pynchon forces readers to question the justifiability of the Line and of the scientific ideology it represents. An interrogation of the ideas which found the Mason-Dixon expedition occurs when Mason recounts his experiences in the eleven day gap, when the Julian calendar replaced the Gregorian calendar: “Yes, eleven days of Light remorseless, to be fac'd alone in a city of Gothickal Structures, that might or might not be inhabited, whilst from all directions came flights of the dark Creatures I hop'd were only ...Bats” (559). The shadowed figures indicate a subjunctive sequence, placing the nether-world of the Eleven days into an uncertain zone. The very presence of this zone cues the reader to Pynchon's

critical tone towards a system of science which would be prescriptive and denotative. As Mason states “ 'Twas as if this Metropolis of British Reason had been abandon'd to the Occupancy of all that Reason would deny” (559). The sudden failure of the epistemological system of calendar time does not leave a blank void, but allows an in-rushing of the fantastic and terrible. The way Pynchon presents the ruptures within the workings of scientific discourse in *Mason & Dixon* grounds his critique of the rational methodologies that generate knowledge in the 18th century.

Midway through the *Mason & Dixon*, the characters in the frame argue over the importance of “History”: the college-educated Ethelmer argues with the more traditional Uncle Ives about the character and legitimacy of historical knowledge.

Who claims Truth, Truth abandons. History is hir'd or coerc'd, only in
Interests that must ever prove base. She is too innocent to be left within
the reach of anyone in Power,— who need but touch her, and all her credit
is in the instant vanish'd as if it had ever been. She needs rather to be
tended lovingly and honorably by fabulists and counterfeiters, Ballad-
Mongers and Cranks of ev'ry radius, Masters of Disguise to provide her
the Costume, Toilette, and Bearing, and Speech nimble enough to keep
her beyond the Desires, or even the Curiosity, of Government. (350)

In this passage Pynchon lends his sympathies to a formulation of history which does not conform to the ends of governments or even to those of historians. The history tended by “Cranks of ev'ry radius” does not seem to be a history of grand battles and great names.

Rather, it is a history which takes into account “more than one Version of the Truth.” Such an account would understand and place higher emphasis on the role of the narrative than the role of accepted facts. Pynchon's polemic seems to indicate a critique of historiography's pretensions to the rigor of “Science,” that favored child of the Enlightenment. This critique forces the reader to understand not only the historical processes involved with the Mason-Dixon line but also the impact that it will have on the development of the nation.

Towards the end of the novel, Pynchon's characters become aware of the impact they might have upon the history of a continent: “Five degrees. Twenty minutes out of a day's Turn. Time enough for all sorts of activities,— eat the wrong Fish, fall in love, sign an order that will alter History” (629). The narrator recounts Mason and Dixon's realization of what they've done: “Having acknowledg'd at the Warpath the Justice of the Indians' Desires, after the two deaths, Mason and Dixon understand as well that the Line is exactly what Capt. Zhang and a number of others have been styling it all along— a conduit for Evil” (701).

In this way, Pynchon's novel introduces a central theme: how actions can influence historical progression, foregrounding a political responsibility on the part of the individual. Reflecting on this theme, the characters realize that they must live with the actions they have taken in creating the Line, and dividing the new nation roughly in half. The Mason-Dixon line will come to represent a political divide which had been imposed on the landscape, closing off alternate futures for the incipient country. America, for

Mason and Dixon both, nevertheless remains a place of ultimate possibility, a place to go to remain young: “that America now would never be more real than his Remembrance” as Dixon recalls late in the novel (754). The loss of the surveyor's dream asks the reader to consider how it is that these characters' journey affected the world around them. Moreover, the relationship that they retain to the possibility of the incipient American nation drives home Pynchon's political argument: the correct response to the political reality of the United States is openness to its possibilities and respect for its unsung histories.

Section IV Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sought to show that Pynchon's construction of subjunctive narrative in *Mason & Dixon* forms an inherently postmodern ontology– and with it a fresh perspective on history. Pynchon's novel encapsulates these new understandings of being and history within an America presently to give birth to a great political experiment. The lessons of Pynchon's postmodern ontology abound and allow the reader a perspective on postmodern possibility. Pynchon's account of Mason and Dixon's journey in the backwoods of the American colonies shows the reader a condition of possibility. The lesson that *Mason & Dixon* teaches is that even in this state of constant and pervasive possibility, we can survive and flourish, living fully with kindness and friendship.

Chapter 2 “The Communion of Toil’: Pynchon's Luddism and Anarchism in *Against the Day*

Thomas Pynchon's 1984 commentary in *The New York Times Book Review* entitled “Is It Ok to Be A Luddite?” identifies the modern anti-technological impulse that is familiar to so many of his readers: an anti-technologism which might stem from Pynchon's coming of age during the Cold War or from the time he spent working for Boeing. Technological invention in earlier Pynchon novels such as *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow* tends to fall into two major categories: the depraved and the soon-to-be-depraved. The military and industrial complexes that fueled World Wars I and II are centers for the qualitatively technological in Pynchon's worlds, each of which is populated by a full coterie of the more or less deranged. Suffice it to say that Pynchon is critical of the technological impulse and its effect on the systems in which it operates. To this end, Pynchon's article functions as a type of self-explanation, or self-exploration, giving the reader an insight into the historical and literary registers of the Luddite impulse and into the process by which such an impulse becomes method, action and, result.

The Luddites were a group of rioters and anti-technological protesters that lived and worked in the northern and midlands regions of England between 1811 and 1816. Pynchon invokes the Oxford English Dictionary, but he leaves the historical narrative out of his discussion and instead focuses on the timeless and figural notion of a Luddite. For

Pynchon, this figure is the folk hero Ned Lud, held by historians, and the OED itself, to have been “a person of weak intellect who lived in a Leicestershire village about 1779, and who in a fit of insane rage rushed into a ‘stockinger’s’ house, and destroyed two frames”(OED “Luddite”). The actual riots that recurred between 1811 and 1816 predicated themselves on this mythical figure’s rage, as workers destroyed the weaving frames of textile manufacturers to protest the usurpation of their jobs by mechanical devices. The critical distance we have today belies the raw human emotion and devastating effects of the Luddite riots, as well as the effects on the historical and linguistic registers which deal with such technological progress. Pynchon engages these registers when he notes:

The knitting machines which provoked the first Luddite disturbances had been putting people out of work for well over two centuries. Everybody saw this happening -- it became part of daily life. They also saw the machines coming more and more to be the property of men who did not work, only owned and hired. It took no German philosopher, then or later, to point out what this did, had been doing, to wages and jobs. Public feeling about the machines could never have been simple unreasoning horror, but likely something more complex: the love/hate that grows up between humans and machinery -- especially when it’s been around for a while -- not to mention serious resentment toward at least two multiplications of effect that were seen as unfair and threatening. One was the concentration of capital that each machine represented, and the other was the

ability of each machine to put a certain number of humans out of work -- to be "worth" that many human souls. (Pynchon "Is it OK to be a Luddite?")

For Pynchon here the question of riots and rage is not simply a binary of development versus handiwork, but of human labor versus machine productivity. The question, it seems for Pynchon, is not the market or retail value of a hand-made or machine-made product, but the ontological question that such a dichotomy forces into the light: if a machine takes a human's work, is it perhaps in some sense a human?

Though he notes that the Luddite riots were indeed class war, Pynchon makes little of the social and economic implications of Luddite ideology, and instead focuses on the question of how such movements as the Luddite riots run counter to the qualities of the technological complex which dehumanize and destroy. Vital for this thesis of Pynchon's is the figure of Ned Lud. "Is it OK to be a Luddite?" holds Lud to have been a factual person and historical figure, but general historical and popular discourse finds an interesting and novel place for Lud both as a patron saint and eponym of self-identification. Various leaders, writers, and protesters, that is, took the name of Ned Lud; the name has become a significant part of the historical discourse about the riots. For Pynchon the figure himself is vital to an understanding of the power of a movement like the Luddite revolt. This figure Pynchon refers to as the "Badass," a character, idea, person, or monster so powerful as to break out of the role to which a given system has assigned him, her, or it. In "Is it Ok to be a Luddite?" Pynchon cites several examples of the Badass, including Godzilla and Frankenstein's monster, and suggests that recognition

of the archetype can foster an understanding of the material and cultural contexts of literature. By the same token, the literary artist who would capture the soul of any given Luddite convulsion would do well to identify its “Badass.” This, I submit, is what Pynchon does in his novels.

In this chapter, I want to argue that Luddism has been largely mischaracterized by critics of Pynchon's work, in terms of both the philosophical position embraced by the Luddites, and the instantiation of Pynchon's Luddism within a particular figure or figures. Because critics have often misunderstood the Luddite element in the novels, they have missed a vital aspect of Pynchon's anarchism: the way that this radical political movement can only occur within the individual, and anarchism's struggle for individual, conscious autonomy, the complexity of which speaks to the ontology, characterized by possibility and struggle, that Pynchon elaborates in his 2006 novel *Against the Day*.

Although *Against the Day* is like Pynchon's other major works in that it is an encyclopaedic novel, it contains a particular set of characters who are ideologically and politically committed to anarchism. Early in the novel Pynchon embodies the ideology of anarchism in the character of Webb Traverse, who may be the mythic “Kieselguhr Kid,” a kind of anarchist and Luddite folk hero. The novel leads the reader to believe that Traverse dons the mask of the Kieselguhr Kid to sabotage the mining and transport networks in the Rocky Mountain ranges of Colorado. One observes here the classic Pynchonite binary of “preterite versus elect” the preterite in this particular narrative world being the miners and other such faceless, working excluded. *Against the Day's*

elect characters acquire a face in the character of Scarsdale Vibe, a wealthy industrialist.

The novel does not directly counterpose the characters of Webb Traverse and Scarsdale Vibe, but the ideologies they embody represent a socio-economic antithesis that Pynchon brilliantly historicizes. Traverse commits acts of anarchist or Luddite violence, while Vibe and his kind enjoy “election” as defined by the dominant, capitalist economic system. Thus a political project becomes central to Pynchon's narrative.

I: Luddism, the problems and characteristics of a social movement

Luddism originated as a series of uprisings that occurred in England at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, between 1811 and 1812. Though often characterized by critics of the day and historians alike as leaderless mobs, the Luddites were a loosely organized political institution that rose in response to a number of conditions in several regions of England including the Northwest, Midlands and Yorkshire. The movement's name stems from an apochryphal legend concerning one “Ned Lud,” a supposedly insane man who broke a weaver's frame in a fit of rage. (OED “Luddite”) The story and the name gave the movement a face, as the various leaders and correspondents within the Luddite movement took on the name Ned Ludd for purposes of disguise. The name, that is, came to represent the movement as each successive group who took on the name and rose against the dominant power has come to be knighted as Luddites by historians. The only thing that truly unites the Luddites as a social movement is a “discourse [which] can be understood as a more or less continuous practice deriving from one forceful act of naming” (Binfield 6).

In common usage in contemporary times, to refer to a person as a “Luddite” is to imply a dislike of technology or technological advancement. The historical basis for such an association is limited at best, for the Luddites seldom expressed hatred of technology. While “Luddism sought to put an end to the manufacturers' use of certain types of machinery,” the focus was not on the technological advancement itself, but on its effect on certain trades and crafts threatened by steam power (Binfield 6). In other words, the movement had similarities with other labor and political riots, rather than being a collection of anti-technological mobs. Kevin Binfield writes that “in the Midlands, Luddism worked in tandem with union-like negotiations to pressure hosiers. Frequently in the Manchester area, attacks on the steam-powered looms coincided with food riots. In both Manchester and Yorkshire, machine breaking went side by side with political radicalism and at times, arms raids and the administration of illegal oaths” (Binfield 6). A movement impinged upon by such political, ideological, economic and social forces is not an easy legacy to honor in a simple, pat quip about a person's anti-technological attitudes. The true Luddite considers the holistic economic environment.

Pynchon adduces the true nature of the Luddite uprisings in his essay “Is it OK to be a Luddite?”. For Pynchon, the Luddite is a class-warrior, for whom technology is merely a frontline of combat. The author expresses his own distrust of the politico-technological establishment:

Luddites today are no longer faced with human factory owners and vulnerable machines. As well-known President and unintentional Luddite

D.D. Eisenhower prophesied when he left office, there is now a permanent power establishment of admirals, generals and corporate CEO's, up against whom us average poor bastards are completely outclassed, although Ike didn't put it quite that way. We are all supposed to keep tranquil and allow it to go on, even though, because of the data revolution, it becomes every day less possible to fool any of the people any of the time.” (Pynchon, “Is it Ok to be a Luddite?”)

In this passage Luddism is a type of epistemology closely related to the Paranoid and the Anarchist, while retaining and honoring a tradition of class warfare based in Pynchon's preterite/elect binary. The “us” of the above quote is an effective first person plural which draws the reader into the struggle, and in a clever way baptizes both the reader and Pynchon under the name of Ned Ludd. Pynchon invites the reader to embrace Luddite rhetoric. The title of “Is it OK to be a Luddite?” asks a question which for those initiated into Pynchon's oeuvre hardly needs answering; for others, however, the author answers the question fairly and charitably, placing each piece of the historical puzzle squarely into the reader's hands.

Luddism as a method of combat and way of being in Pynchon's 2006 novel *Against the Day* takes the shape of the dynamiter Webb Traverse. Though the novel does not give a comprehensive biography of this character, the reader gathers that he is a skilled explosives technician who for his own ideological purposes dynamites bridges, mine buildings, and other physical traces of the “owners”: the large conglomerate mining

companies who exploit and abuse local labor to fulfill silver and copper quotas. Webb Traverse makes of dynamite a weapon, tool and, method of understanding the world, a window unto the larger political and economic stage. Because Traverse's targets are largely the constructions of larger and more powerful entities and are part of a larger set of labor and political concerns, the reader might find it advantageous to characterize such dynamiting as Luddism in the sense delineated by Pynchon in "Is it Ok to be a Luddite?" Pynchon describes anarchism early in the novel from Traverse's viewpoint as he meets the character Merle Rideout:

Useful magic that might go one better on the widely admired Mexican principle of politics through chemistry. Not that life wasn't peculiar enough up in these mountains already, but here was this fast talking quicksilver wizard in with fresh news that maybe, with luck, it was fixing to get even more so, and the day of commonwealth and promise, temples of Mammon all in smithereens— poor folks on the march, bigger than Coxey's Army, through the rubble— that much closer. (Pynchon 79)

In this reflection Pynchon highlights the explicit connection between dynamite and politics, especially the type of politics that the character of Webb Traverse embodies— a politics which might be construed as Luddite (though Luddism has no official narrative space within the novel). In the *Against the Day*, the political binary falls roughly along a line between "Anarchist" and "Not Anarchist." Pynchon divides the Anarchist camp into several divisions, the largest and perhaps most featured in the novel being the Luddite-

inspired dynamiter Webb Traverse and his apparent alter ego, the Kieselguhr Kid. There are also the politically active subversives of the latter portion of the novel, encapsulated in the mirrored characters of Werfner and Renfrew. The “Not Anarchist” camp finds its roots in the capitalist and industrialist characters: the Scarsdale Vibes of the world.

Throughout the novel, each group makes either literal or figurative war against the other ideological camp through its particular and unique methods.

For the purposes of this paper, the idea of anarchism subsumes Luddism. The connection of labor to dynamite is a clear and potent theme for Pynchon in the novel. As the Reverend Moss points out to Webb Traverse, “dynamite is both the miner's curse, the outward and audible sign of his enslavement to mineral extraction, and the American working man's equalizer, his agent of deliverance, if he dare to use it” (Pynchon 87). The strains of Luddism are strong here, particularly since the historical English Luddites destroyed complex machines with hammers and other simple tools. The destruction wrought by the early Luddites was protest; the steam-powered stocking frame commonly destroyed in Luddite raids stood as a symbol of the oppression of an unfair economic system. The parallel here is fairly clear: the form of anarchism as it is instantiated within *Against the Day* follows closely the structure of the historical movement of Luddism.

Understanding Webb Traverse's anarchist activity as a type of Luddism allows the reader to understand more fully Pynchon's anarchist project within *Against the Day*.

Luddism, while often heralded as an anti-technological movement, did not take exception to technological invention, only those technologies which harm the value of labor within

a given industry. As Pynchon points out in “Is it OK to be a Luddite?”, Luddites fought a battle for the human dignity of labor. This same dignity occupies the above passage from *Against the Day*, in the understanding that men are enslaved to “mineral extraction” and by the owners and operators of mines. The owners have a certain typology within the novel. Pynchon associates them with secretness and invisibility, as well as bureaucratic impulse: “The atmosphere in Colorado those days had become so poisoned that the owners were ready to believe anything about anybody. They hired what they called “detectives,” who started keeping dossiers on persons of interest” (92). The currency of the owners is money, a direct contrast to the dynamite currency of the anarchists. The novel, as is if to emphasize this binary, includes the anarchists in the narrative as actual narrators and centers of consciousness. The novel also features actual textual and physical spaces for anarchism, such as the Anarchist's saloon and the headquarters of the political society humorously acronymed as “T.W.I.T.” (219). Anarchism, is a collection plate of the confused and dispossessed. Lew Basnight, a detective from Chicago who is sent by the White City Investigations to catch the Kieselguhr Kid, is just such a character: “Later he made it back to the Anarchist's saloon, and there, as he'd half expected, was this customer giving him one of those unfinished business looks[...] 'Buy you a beer?' 'Depends if you've come to your senses yet’” (181). Throughout the novel Basnight figures as a sort of drifter, pushed from place to place by unseen forces. If the reader were to assume a type of allegorical relationship of specific characters to general character types, Basnight is the drifting center of consciousness whose task is to focus the novel on

a given system or place. Many of Pynchon's main characters function this way; Tyrone Slothrop and Oedipa Maas are the most notable who follow this pattern.

Pynchon depicts Basnight's gradual conversion to anarchism by immersing him in the painful circumstances that obtain in the Colorado high country: poverty, class struggle, and the abuse of the workers by the mine owners. Even as Basnight hunts the Kiesulguhr Kid, he struggles with anarchism's tidal pull:

In the course of his anarchist-hunting days in Chicago, Lew had found his way to a convenient insulation, for a while anyhow, from too much sympathy for either victim or perpetrator. How could you walk into the aftermath of a bombing and get anywhere by going all to pieces over the senseless waste of life, the blood and pain? Only slowly would it occur to his ultra-keen detective's reasoning that these bombs could have been set by anybody, including those who would clearly benefit if "Anarchists" however loosely defined could be blamed for it. Neither, in the course of long pursuits down back of the Yards and beyond, was it escaping his attention how desperately miserable were the lives found among the realities of Anarchist communion, though it promised a man his only redemption from a captivity often cruel as the old Negro slavery. (175)

Pynchon here sets anarchism in a specific context and draws a teleological link between social justice and anarchism. Anarchism, and the violence associated with it, is

a way for the disenfranchised to claim a stake in the local environment and society. The anarchism of the Colorado high country, while framed in *Against the Day* as a battle against the owners, is not simply an ideology– it is a collection of the marginalized persons in a specific area who have gathered to fight for specific goals. Anarchism in *Against the Day* should not be confused with the individual pursuit of governmental annihilation, but a collectivist movement seeking to promote the autonomy of the individual or the community. The role that Luddite protest plays lends subtlety to the reader's understanding of the problem and process of anarchism. Though Luddism was a labor and class war fought at a time of political and social upheaval, it was not explicitly anarchist in nature. In 1812, a radical newspaper printed a poem titled “Well Done Ned Lud” which decries “tyrants grt and small” and claims that machine breaking is a proper but not the only way to battle them (Binfield 130). Violence is also in order for battling an oppressive regime. Pynchon's anarchism bears similar if not exact parallels to Luddism in this respect.

What distinguishes these movements is the way Luddism did not have an established, or programmatic aim, while anarchism and anarchists were given to manifestos. The anarchism of the novel rests on the model that arose in the late 19th century in the larger cities of Europe and the United States. During the postbellum expansion of manufacturing, the gap between rich and poor became even greater than it had under Reconstruction. This led to labor disputes which, in combination with the rise of socialist and anarchist theory in Europe, bore fruit in the shape of several violent

incidents, the most famous of which was the Haymarket bombing and riot. The eight men who were accused of conspiring to plant the bomb, which resulted in the death of 11 people, were tried, convicted, and imprisoned or executed. Lucy Parsons, a prominent contemporary anarchist and wife of Albert Parsons, wealthy anarchist publisher, transcribed and edited a collection of speeches by the accused in the courtroom. August Spies, an active and important anarchist in Chicago at that time, cried in his speech that he was:

an Anarchist. I believe with Buckle, with Paine, Jefferson, Emerson and Spencer, and many other great thinkers of this century that the state of castes and classes- the state where one class dominates over and lives upon the labor of another class and calls this order- yes I believe that this barbaric form of social organization, with its legalized plunder and murder, is doomed to die, and make room for a free society, voluntary association, or universal brotherhood, if you like. You may pronounce the sentence upon me, honorable judge, but let the world know that in A.D. 1886, in the state of Illinois, eight men were sentenced to death because they believed in a better future; because they had not lost their faith in the ultimate victory of liberty and justice! (Parsons 14)

Rhetoric such as that of Spies in 1886 gives the anarchism in Pynchon's novel its background and context. Spies' egalitarian sentiments lend credence to the slow turn of Lew Basnight towards the anarchist persuasion. The battle Anarchism waged in the U.S.

in this period is explicitly a class battle with utopian aspirations, a hope to win the poor and disenfranchised a new and more communal future. Graham Benton in “Riding the Interface: An Anarchist Reading of Gravity's Rainbow” writes that “such a characterization of anarchism as ephemeral and elastic— besides frustrating the scholar intent on unearthing the essence of anarchism— is instrumental in informing the utopian dimension so important in anarchist discourse” (Benton 154). The utopian qualities of anarchism in Pynchon then stem from exactly this shadowed, variable nature. The power of Traverse's anarchism is that no one knows that he's an anarchist, and the power of Basnight's late night conversation partner in the Anarchist saloon is that he has no name or face as far as the text is concerned.

II *Dynamite and Anarchism: an Ontology*

Facelessness, then, becomes a powerful tool in the fight for a free society. The Kieselguhr Kid is a mysterious figure in the early part of *Against the Day*— and a narrative wrinkle towards the end. Early on, Pynchon's narrator describes the Kid through an anonymous chorus of textual voices “Don't carry pistols, don't own a shotgun nor a rifle— no, his trade-mark is, what you'll find him packing in those tooled holsters, is always these twin sticks of dynamite, with a dozen more—”, and “Got this clever wind-proof striker rig on to each holster, like a safety match, so all's he has to do's draw, and the sucker's all lit and ready to throw.” Pynchon's narrator adds that “nobody ever'd been sure about who was in Butch Cassidy's gang either. No shortage of legendary deeds up here, but eyewitnesses could never swear beyond a doubt who in each case exactly, had

done which, and more than fear of retaliation— it was as if physical appearance *actually shifted*, causing not only aliases to be inconsistently assigned but identity itself to change” (Pynchon 172).

The ephemeral nature of the Kiesulguhr Kid has several important effects on the novel's Luddite and Anarchist ideas. As noted previously, the Luddite uprisings were focused and united by a particular style of naming. The faceless, nameless character of “Ned Ludd” recurs in both legend and contemporary text, and was a common rallying point for all three of the major Luddite movements. Kevin Binfield argues that this act of naming defines and makes unique the Luddites as a movement. In “Is it OK to be a Luddite?” Pynchon points out that the character of Ned Ludd fulfills the archetype of the “Badass” and that a committed reader will notice this archetype throughout literature.

Pynchon writes that

When times are hard, and we feel at the mercy of forces many times more powerful, don't we, in seeking some equalizer, turn, if only in imagination, in wish, to the Badass -- the djinn, the golem, the hulk, the superhero -- who will resist what otherwise would overwhelm us? Of course, the real or secular frame-bashing was still being done by everyday folks, trade unionists ahead of their time, using the night, and their own solidarity and discipline, to achieve their multiplications of effect. (“Is it Ok to be a Luddite?”)

Ned Ludd, as a Badass, is the powerful equalizer and fighter for the oppressed and against the tyrants of industry. What complicates Pynchon's vision of Ned Ludd is his very ephemerality. The author seems to emphasize Ned Ludd's legendary nature. The Badass, for Pynchon, is the character who puts a face to a given struggle, and who captures the panic and antagonism of a given situation, and this person need not be physical, or even real. The character of Ned Ludd is explicitly that, a character.

Here we find a particular confluence between Ned Lud and the Kiesulguhr Kid. Both are fictional characters who attain agency through the people that take on their respective masks. Both are narrative and textual Badasses, in the sense that they symbolize a movement, and both are ephemeral. This ephemerality is essential for the function of the characters within their respective movements; to be more defined or more delineated would not allow the individuals who take on the characters as masks to be as fully ideological as they are. In the second act of the novel, Frank Traverse, the son and heir of Webb Traverse, finds himself the captive of prospective employers in Mexico, by virtue of the suspicion that he is the infamous Kieselguhr Kid. Through the dialog Frank holds with his captor, the novel introduces a level of ambiguity concerning Frank's crusading identity; ““I wonder if you'd be this jocular with the real Kieselguhr Kid...wouldn't you be showing more respect, hell I don't know, some fear even[...]What I mean was, there must be some room there in your mind for the chance you got the wrong fella?”. Pynchon here holds his proverbial cards close to the vest, so that even when the Kid is given a textual face and narrative, there is no absolute act of naming. Even his

Anarchist employers rely on the retelling of legend to identify Frank; “specifically to offer you some contract employment, it being widely believed, down here as back on the other side, that you, sorry if I'm being too direct, 're none other than that Kieselguhr of Wild West legend” (382).

It is this “wide belief” and “room in the mind” that, even at the very moment, precludes definitive identification. The Kieselguhr Kid cannot have a face, and Frank Traverse, who has a face, cannot have the name. Within the name lies the power for the revolutionary tendency of the novel, just as the various authors who took on the moniker of Ned Ludd, contained all of the power of that movement. George Levine, in his essay “Risking the Moment: Anarchy and Possibility in Pynchon's Fiction,” writes that

Character, in traditional fiction, is the clearest emblem of the elect-- dominating and controlling the action of the world. And Pynchon creates character by imagining it as participating in the energies of the world around it...Character is an abstraction that allows us to see through the moment, not to experience it. Explanation of actions in terms of motives, psychoanalysis, instincts, gets us off the hook of responsibility to each lived moment. (66)

The Kieselguhr Kid does just this, holds reader, narrator and fellow characters responsible for the actions that he takes. At this juncture lies the bulk of Pynchon's anarchism, which in *Against the Day* is simultaneously a mass movement and an idea encapsulated within a figure. Bear in mind that this is not an allegorical correspondence,

nor is it precisely symbolism. It is a shifting, moving process of signification which has all the hallmarks of Pynchon's postmodern indeterminacy. Historically, American Anarchism had none of this indeterminacy. It was a relatively short lived labor movement which ended in the riot and bombing at Haymarket Square in Chicago. The indeterminacy presented within *Against the Day* allows the reader to imagine a form of political possibility, reclamation, even. Levine further notes that anarchism in Pynchon's earlier work is “[a] quest for a pre-verbal directness of experience” (72). The anarchy in *Against the Day* seems by extension to be less the struggle with the process of signification than an attempt to access the world at any level. Pynchon's politics here stem not from the ever-retreating nature of reality into the process of signification, but from a desire to engage the world in any way possible. This distinction rewrites the literary critical notion of postmodernity, and moves that notion towards a perspective fully invested in the various and sundry registers of being.

For the characters in the beginning of the novel for whom social action or inclusion is a serious issue, the primary method of communication is violence by dynamite. Dynamite in the American Anarchist movement plays a fraught but central role, as critics often term dynamite the tool of terrorism and aggressive Marxist or anarchist tactics. Michael J. Schaack's *Anarchy and Anarchists* contains an entire chapter on the role, in Chicago, of “Dynamite in Politics.” Schaack illuminates in his chapter the role that dynamite played in the anarchist movement in the late 19th century. He details the political environment in Russia during this time:

The average Russian Nihilist is a young man or young woman—very often the latter— who, by the contemplation of real wrongs and fallacious remedies, has come to be the implacable enemy of all order and all system. Usually they are half educated, with just that superficial smattering of knowledge to make them conceited in their own opinions, but without enough real learning to make them either impartial critics or safe citizens of impartial countries. We can pity them, for it is easy to see how step by step they have been pushed into revolt. But they are dangerous. (Schaak 32)

The reader should bear in mind that Shaack dedicates his 1889 volume to the judges in the prosecution of the Haymarket anarchists. In the establishment view, of terrorist dynamiting was deemed the action of nihilists, a dangerous and alien element for the Americans and Western Europeans who formed, in Pynchon's terms, the Elect. Dynamite then, is the weapon and the bargaining tool of the preterite. For Pynchon's Anarchists, dynamite provides a type of catharsis which rights the wrongs of inequality and oppression. Dynamite does not, however, come to symbolize the Anarchist movement; it merely becomes the hinge that links the Anarchist and the normal miner. The shift is present when Frank Traverse attempts to convince his captors that he is not the Kiesulguhr Kid: “Heck of an assumption, Dwayne, seems like that you'd somehow know better, man been up and down the territory and so forth[...]” “You're... just a mine engineer and that's all” (Pynchon 382). The anarchist dynamiter— whether Webb, Frank,

or someone else— moves into and out of the narrative mask of the Kieselguhr Kid by virtue of the fact that he shares with him a means and method. This or that avatar of the Kid makes dynamite the currency of the Anarchist in terms of both the violence he pursues and the anonymity he needs.

This is exactly the relationship that the Luddite has to technological invention. The invention allows a certain antagonistic purpose, but it is also the substantive link that the Luddite has to his own struggle against technology. Luddism, as a movement and as the subject of Pynchon's essay, needs this binary relationship to technology to sustain itself. The ambiguous position of the Luddite and the Anarchist with respect to their nominal objects makes the mythical nature of each more present than it might have been. In the words of George Levine, Pynchon's narrative strategy allows us to experience the world. The two faces of a political Janus underscore a type of ontology that is, as will be seen, central to Pynchon's creative imagination.

III The Being within the Narrative

When critics speak of “ontology” generally they intend to signify the philosophical study of being, a particular entity, whether a person, place, or even a narrative (OED “Ontology”). In this paper “ontology” signifies a set of principles by which a reader can come to understand how a particular text— in this case Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day*— constructs a type of being. Brian McHale's famous distinction between texts with an epistemological dominant, and texts with an ontological dominant, has come to be the fundamental distinction between “Modernist” and

“Postmodernist” texts.

Against the Day can be considered a postmodern text by virtue of its narrative style or authorship, but the defining characteristic of the novel is the way it creates and maintains a particular world. Loosely characterized, this world is historical as well as fantastic. It maintains a link to actual events which happened in factual places, and it forms with style and grace a web of characters who each relate to each other across time and space. Pynchon's characters each take on a position within the broader context of the novel either in relation to each other or in relation to the place in which they make the most narrative waves. “Pynchon's novels disorient,” George Levine says, “They offer us a world we think we recognize, assimilate it to worlds that seem utterly unreal, imply coherences and significances we can't quite hold on to” (Levine 57). Such a “worlding,” which seems to approach a type of mimesis but fails to provide a concrete connection between the reader's world and the world of the novel, is precisely the type of work that Brian McHale claims has an ontological dominant. McHale writes in *Postmodernist Fiction* that “postmodernist questions bear either on the the ontology of the literary text itself, or on the ontology of the world which it projects” (McHale 11).

While *Against the Day* certainly invites consideration of its own ontology as text, it focuses ultimately on that of the world its author creates. While there are several ways for the critic to approach *Against the Day's* ontology, I suggest that Pynchon's anarchistic political project offers a particular insight into the way the novel creates and maintains both of its ontologies.

This discussion and analysis focuses on the way a Luddite reading influences our understanding of anarchism's thematic role in Pynchon's novel. I understand Pynchon's narrative as an essentially Luddite endeavor, and by contextualizing the Kieselguhr Kid within the Luddite tradition of naming as a form of rebellion, I identify features that are of particular importance for an ontological reading of *Against the Day*. The first of these is a reiteration and recasting of the “elect” and “preterite” binary from Pynchon's earlier works, particularly *Gravity's Rainbow*. The second is the indeterminate nature of the “Badass” figure within *Against the Day*. It remains for this essay to adduce and analyze the way Pynchon constitutes from these themes and textual elements a study of being.

Any thematic reading of Pynchon's work is challenged from the start by the immense impossibility of such a task, not least due to the encyclopaedic nature of the novels, in addition to Pynchon's complex vision, not to mention the sheer number of characters in any given work. An examination of *Against the Day*'s thematic features must be incomplete and reductionist by virtue of its status as a “reading” and not a “complete analysis” of questions pertinent to the novel.

The binary which pervades Pynchon's work is between the faceless elect on one hand and the marginalized preterite on the other. *Against the Day* articulates this binary and eternal struggle in terms of anarchism. As Graham Benton notes in his essay “Daydreams and Dynamite: Anarchist Strategies of Resistance and Paths for Transformation in *Against the Day*”, “Anarchist platforms suggest strategies for change involving the implementation of nonauthoritarian and decentralist alternatives” (193).

The anarchist project for Pynchon's oeuvre in general and for *Against the Day* in particular is to displace the elect or the influence of the elect to foster a society more congenial to individual autonomy. While this may seem like too general a theme on which to found a premise of being, the prevalence of anarchism in *Against the Day* forces the reader to accept anarchism as a major conduit of meaning in the text. Benton comments: "The novel treats anarchy and anarchists hundreds of times. We are witness to anarchist bombers, anarchist hunters, and anarchist preachers who frequent anarchist saloons, anarchist coffeehouses, and anarchist spas" (193). For Benton, an anarchist hermeneutic has a destabilizing effect on the narrative of the novel: "I read the tension that is generated in *Against the Day*" on the level of genre as a textual embodiment of the tension on the level of historical interpretation. That is, the resistance of realism by fantasy is reproduced as a resistance of the forces of rationalization and totalizing empirical systems" (193).

Benton claims that the novel is itself anarchic in the sense that George Levine notes: Pynchon's idiom clashes, from novel to novel, with the historical period foregrounded. The chaotic nature of plots and narrative structures compound the effect. Both Benton and Levine associate this "disorganization" with anarchy, woven at a fundamental level into Pynchon's narrative.

Against the Day does follow an anarchic narrative pattern, particularly with respect to the Day which Pynchon prefigures midway through the novel. At this point, the character Yashmeen Halfcourt has hidden herself in Vienna, and is living incognito when

a mysterious twilight affects the city:

It went on for a month. Those who had taken it for a cosmic sign cringed beneath the sky each nightfall, imagining ever more extravagant disasters. Others, for whom orange did not seem an appropriately apocalyptic shade, sat outdoors on public benches, reading calmly, growing used to the curious pallor. As nights went on and nothing happened and the phenomenon slowly faded to the accustomed deeper violets again, most had difficulty remembering the earlier rise of heart, the sense of overture and possibility and went back once again to seeking only orgasm, hallucination, stupor, sleep to fetch them through the night and prepare them against the day. (805)

Though wonderfully poetic, this passage intimates with the potent word “possibility,” some extraordinary but abortive recalibration of the Viennese twilight. Pynchon's works configure indeterminacy as possibility. In *Mason & Dixon*, the grammatical notion of subjunctivity conveys whole realms of possibility, ungoverned by the qualitatively empirical or logical systems of the Enlightenment. *Against the Day* in the above passage unites the ideas of possibility and twilight in a type of pathetic fallacy, creating for the reader a choice among liminalities.

For Pynchon's Viennese, this choice is only open for a short while, as “most had difficulty remembering their earlier rise of heart”; for readers, however, the window remains open, as the the tone of the section of the novel that follows seems permeated

with its own crepuscular coloration. Thus, the passage in question gives the reader a knowledge of the text which the characters do not seem to share. The powerful authorial and narrative voice that Pynchon maintains in his works stays in the background within *Against the Day* yet allows the reader to come to an understanding of the ontology within the text. The anarchic pattern of narrative, filtered through a strong narrative voice, creates a textual ontology that one experiences as indeterminate and charged with possibility.

While *Against the Day* presents us with a particular vision of anarchy, it is only a cartoonish, partially complete vision within the text. While the overarching predominance of anarchy as a social and cultural system within the text might bely any cartoonish appearance, it is radically present in the form of the dialogue of the characters, and the portrayal of such a locale as an “anarchist saloon.” It would be fallacious to argue that mere predominance of a set of ideas or themes necessarily presupposes any ontology or theory of being, particularly for an author of Pynchon's theoretical and philosophical skill. Instead the constituent structure of anarchist theory supports a textual reality that evolves into an ontology as the novel progresses.

The novel forces each character who moves, as it were against the day to confront a particular reality of his or her own existence with respect to the future. The character's definition of that future becomes a reality as the narrative acquires momentum and collapses into the event of the Day itself. Near the end of the novel, Kit Traverse, active in anarchist politics and terrorism in Central Europe, finds himself fading into a context

in which he himself is the indeterminate and lost: “Kit went down to the Downy Dworzec and got on a train headed west, though soon he went across the tracks onto another platform and waited for the train going east till after a while he was getting on and off trains bound for destinations he was less and less sure of” (1080). This turn towards indeterminacy should be read as the increasingly indeterminate ontological state that Kit embraces through his own anarchic and chaotic movement. Presently he sees Lake Baikal in a vision. “The other side of this Baikal, he understood, was accessible only to those of intrepid spirit. To go there and come back would be like living through the end of the world. From this precise spot along the shoreline it was possible to 'see' on the far shore a city, crystalline, redemptive. There was music, mysteriously audible, tonal yet deliberately broken into by dissonances—demanding, as if each note insisted on being attended to” (1080).

Many of the characters in *Against the Day* experience their own version of crossing the lake in Kit's vision, and each comes to the understanding that surviving the future is impossible. All that remains is simply to hold on and persist through their lives. Pynchon's aesthetic concern in the above passage welds the narrative to an ontology contained within the text, an ontology that is eternally present and yet concerned explicitly with the indeterminate nature of the future. In *Against the Day*, more than in his other texts, Pynchon imagines the subjunctivity and indeterminacy of lived, phenomenological experience.

The aims of the anarchists in Pynchon's novel—both against the deterministic and

violent ways of the current social order, and for an existence which is autonomous and limits the rights of institutions to manage, control, or subdue the individual— contribute to its general understanding of personal autonomy and the limits of that autonomy. The ontological framework Pynchon gives the reader places that autonomy within the eternal struggle for freedom. Because Pynchon's future is impossible, and the present in certain ways less certain than the future, the subjects are left to struggle constantly for autonomy with respect to the passage of time and the occupying of space.

This eternal struggle characterizes the failure of Pynchon's anarchism. Scholars of Pynchon's politics, including Sean Malloy, George Levine, and George Benton all note that Pynchon's anarchism is destroyed as soon as it is conceived. It is a continually doomed project, a dead philosophy. The political doom that anarchism faces is partially the result of the indeterminacy of its project, which precludes its stability as a political platform. The other portion of anarchism's failure, however, comes from the nature of its methods. Dynamite plays a role that is more than political. Anarchists resorted to violent, terrorist action to make their point against a given government or institution. Literally, as well as metaphorically, dynamite is the currency of anarchism. But it is fungible only in the marketplace of oblivion. Ostensibly the emblem of a particular individual's stand against a larger force, a stick of explosive is the means to an explosion. Anarchism, for Pynchon, can only find its effects in momentary, local, and individual levels.

IV The Power of the Luddite Way

It is at this juncture that Pynchon's Ludditism and his anarchism speak fluently to

one another. The Luddite, like the anarchist, fights against a larger power but with a markedly different understanding of the stakes. Just as Pynchon's Badass figure captures the ethos and fear of a time and rises up to engage the darkness, his anarchists must rise up for their own autonomy. For Luddites, the stakes are not only ever their right to do as they please, but the very identity that they possess and hope to sustain. The Anarchist retains his beliefs on principle or as a matter of ethics, whereas Luddites are only Luddites by virtue of their liminal state as persons in danger of losing their identities in the face of technological progress. In this sense it is a war– not to put too fine a point on it– for their own “ontological” standing. The technological, the institutional, and the futural are all threats that Pynchon's characters must face. Otherwise they can only seek oblivion as they prepare themselves against the Day of displacement and dissolution.

Chapter 3

Conclusion

Together, these two essays articulate Thomas Pynchon's attitude towards being. Pynchon's postmodern ontology is a wholly positive take on being in an era which is primarily concerned with the loss of an articulable meaning and the devolution of large, foundational ideas. That is, Pynchon's novels attempt to make the uncertainty of the postmodern era a positive and constructive force. In the absence of a metanarrative of being, we must bear the responsibility for the future: to resist the powers of capitalizing technology, of destructive colonialism, we must become the best, most true, version of ourselves. Pynchon, in these novels, shows us ways of being in the world which allow us to retain our autonomy, our individuality, and our lives.

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