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Title

Whose Line is it Anyway?: Enlightenment, Revolution and Ipseic Ethics in the Works of Thomas Pynchon

Abstract

This piece effects a critical revision of the interactions between late Foucault and the works of Thomas Pynchon through the theme of Enlightenment, a relationship far more nuanced than granted by current appraisals. Examining resistance, revolution and the critical attitude alongside a focus on the Foucauldian sphere of ethics, this work posits Pynchon's negative and positive utopianism as a regulative idea. Reading both Pynchon's fiction and his essays, particularly "Nearer My Couch to Thee," alongside Foucault's two pieces on Kant's "Was ist Aufklärung?," it emerges that the divide between Pynchon and Foucault hinges more upon what we can know about ourselves and not necessarily, as has always been supposed, on who, or how, we can dominate. Pynchon's stance on revolution and resistance runs broadly in line with late Foucault's remarks on incrementalism; any change that can come about will, and should, be incremental while remaining pessimistic towards Meliorism. The narrowing of the sphere of ethics to ipseity that Foucault introduces to effectively counter the problems of agency that this entails, however, are not shared by Pynchon. For Pynchon, work upon the self is intrinsically contaminated and cannot be clearly delineated from the wider, impinging systems. With apologies to the author himself, it seems fair to say that when reading Pynchon in the Foucauldian Enlightenment tradition: we do know what's going on (to some, perhaps ingrained and inescapably limited, extent), and we let it go on, only ever imagining, in sorrow, how it could (never) be otherwise.

Main Text

Pynchon, Foucault and Enlightenment

As many critics have observed, in the works of Thomas Pynchon, the birth of Modernity is

depicted under the sign of Max Weber. It is shown as an oppressive rationalisation that banishes and dominates all that would stand in its way: “[t]he death of magic” as Jeff Baker puts it.¹ Although such an appraisal of Weber lacks nuance, the insertion of this astrological foretelling into the very core of America's political system is no better expressed than in *Gravity's Rainbow's* “MOM SLOTHROP'S LETTER TO AMBASSADOR KENNEDY”.² This letter – which depicts Slothrop's mother writing to Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr. about her empathy for the senator's parental unease during JFK's Patrol Torpedo boat incident in 1943, her anxiety about the state of America and her sexual relations with the future president – seems to echo with the guilt-ridden foreboding style of Samuel Beckett's *Eh Joe?* The comparative effect is achieved not only through the structural motion from an optimistic inquiry, “Well hi Joe how've ya been,” parallel to Beckett's greeting “You're all right now, eh?,” before becoming “gloomy all so sudden,” but also by the frequent comma delimited first name appellation to the ambassador: “It's every parent's dream, Joe, that it is [...] It isn't starting to break down, is it, Joe? [...] You know, don't you? Golden clouds? Sometimes I think – ah, Joe, I think they're pieces of the heavenly city falling down”. While Beckett's piece focuses upon an old man listening to an ex-lover holding him to account for a young girl's suicide, Pynchon's microcosmic imitation uses the guilt-tripping voice of a “wicked old babe” to demonstrate that the love-'em and leave-'em approach of big business leads to a “terrible fear” and a rightly-felt difficulty believing “in a Plan with a shape bigger than I can see”; it is an approach that Pynchon depicts as having “laid,” in Beckett's terms, the general populous with its promise to use the “WLB” (War Labor Board) to keep the war effort on track and suppress “strike votes,” while insidiously profiting from the continuation of the war. Furthermore, it is a project of Weberian disenchantment; “Golden clouds” and the “heavenly city” conjure the destruction of a thoroughly enchanted, metaphysical environment which is “broken down” in the Benjaminian battering of Klee's angel. Ultimately, the young girl of America, the spirit made light, will face her suicidal moment but, in the meantime, without seeing the whole plan, Nalline Slothrop can

only have faith that Ambassador Kennedy is “in the groove” and take the fortune-teller's word – “How true!” – that the contemporary Zodiac will admit but one course: “we've *got* to modernize in Massachusetts, or it'll just keep getting worse and worse”.

The critical trajectory of modernity and enlightenment that ends in Max Weber is, however, totalitarian in its interpretation; it will not permit the other. Contrary to the stance that could emerge here, Weber is neither the be-, or end-, all of Enlightenment in Pynchon's work, though; the Enlightenment consists of many philosophical traditions. As Mason and Dixon might have asked: “whose Line is it anyway?” Alongside the relativism that is so crucial to Weber's and Pynchon's respective projects, this concept of slavish obedience, or trust in authority to think on our behalf as demonstrated in the above passage – and especially when that authority insists that we modernize through technological positivism – is central to two essays bearing the same title – ‘What is Enlightenment?’ – the first written by Immanuel Kant, the second by Michel Foucault. In light of this and as a corrective to the previous lack of critical attention to this field, this article will propose a neglected tradition for Pynchon studies: the Foucauldian.

It is worthwhile and useful to briefly trace the chronology of the few works that have, to date, dealt with Thomas Pynchon and Michel Foucault in parallel primarily because most of these pieces have seen little common ground. Indeed, in Will McConnell's assessment, with overtones of Beckett and Wittgenstein, little is left to tell and it is only in the private spaces of silence that the two writers can possibly co-exist: “we should leave Foucault and Pynchon to their respective silences, and work to produce our own”.³ In the approach to such a conclusion, McConnell succinctly addressed the problematic disparities of Pynchonian and Foucauldian models of power; power, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, is mostly conceived in terms of repression, as opposed to Foucault's contention of power as a productive force.⁴ Blurring this distinction between modalities of power proved somewhat problematic in Hanjo Berressem's work when he asserted that Foucauldian power possesses a “specific anonymity” that presents a “focus on

the subject's tragic inscription within power,"⁵ citing *Discipline and Punish*. While Berressem accurately summarises Foucauldian power as a discursive network, to describe such an inscription as "tragic" does not do justice to Foucault's statement that "we must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it 'excludes,' it 'represses,' it 'censors,' it 'abstracts,' it 'masks,' it 'conceals.' In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth".⁶ It seems that Berressem's notion of the tragically inscribed subject is an inadequate description of Foucault's thought; it is not that "Pynchon foregrounds the *complicity* between the subject and power" in opposition to Foucault, but rather that Foucault defines power as a positive and necessary construction that underpins all social reality.⁷ In spite of these minor problems, Berressem's adept demonstration, from a Lacanian perspective, that Foucault is describing the "shift from a politics of the discourse of the master to one of the discourse of knowledge [...] from slave to a disciplined and normalized surface," will be furthered upon here as it is crucial to Foucault's thought on Enlightenment.⁸

Moving out of the nineties and Frank Palmeri asserted that "[j]ust as we can observe both continuities in and divergences between Foucault's earlier investigations of regimes of truth and power and his late focus on subjectification and ethics, we can see continuities in and divergences between the vision of powerful impersonal forces in Pynchon's earlier works and in his later *Vineland* (1990) and *Mason & Dixon* (1997)".⁹ Such a mode seems to accurately trace the structural development in Foucault's thought, but assumes a parallelism of enterprise between the philosopher and the novelist, masquerading, perhaps, behind an epistemic unconscious wishing to escape from the banner of postmodernism under which the two writers are aligned. Finally, the most astute use of the Foucauldian methodological toolbox must be ascribed to David Cowart, whose "Pynchon, Genealogy, History" sees affinity between the later Foucault's historical method and that of the novelist.¹⁰

Foucault's work on the theme of Enlightenment varies enormously throughout his

career and these interactions are situated primarily in his lesser-known works, which to date have not been given the attention they deserve in Pynchon scholarship. Foucault's explicit engagement with, and definition of, Enlightenment (indexed on the terms “l’Aufklärung” and “lumière”) takes place predominantly in his later articles from 1978 onwards within *Dits et Écrits* catalogue numbers 219, 266, 281, 279, 291, 306, 330, 339, 351, 353 and 361, with a few offhand earlier remarks in *DÉ*002 and 040 and one additional fleeting mention in *Complément Bibliographique*-16.¹¹ When this material is surveyed, Foucault's schema can be conceived in three distinct phases covering modernity, judgement, revolution and ethics. It is to these last two phases to which this article will draw attention

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It is in 1984 – a year to which Pynchon has made reference on many occasions, mostly in relation to Orwell's novel, but also in the setting of *Vineland* – at this late stage in Foucault's career that one encounters his most significant artefacts on Enlightenment as it pertains to revolution and ipseic ethics; the two pieces both entitled “Qu'est-ce que les Lumières?” [What is Enlightenment?]: one an essay (*DÉ*339, English translation same year), the other an extract from a Collège de France lecture course (*DÉ*351, English translation 1986). These two pieces, which cover broadly the same themes surrounding Kant's minor work, “Was ist Aufklärung?,” centre upon the non-teleological, constantly-contemporary philosophical reflexivity that, Foucault claimed, was inaugurated by Kant's article: the Enlightenment as an “exit” or “way out”.¹² In Foucault's reading, this Enlightenment raises, in many ways, the same paradoxical formation that sits at the heart of *The Order of Things*; recursive knowledge structures, the “empirico-transcendental doublet”. In Foucault's later thoughts on Enlightenment, however, it is the relationship of the individual to the broader context, between what is given to the individual and what the individual contributes back, it is “the present as a philosophical event incorporating within it the philosopher who speaks of it,” that becomes important. In short, “one sees philosophy [...] problematising its own discursive present-ness,” casting the

philosopher within a group “corresponding to a cultural ensemble characteristic of his own contemporaneity”.¹³ Foucault is, by this account, not so far from the Frankfurt School's definition of philosophy: the attempt to bridge the chasm between intuition and concept.¹⁴

In relation to the works of Thomas Pynchon, the English translation of the second of the two Foucault pieces under discussion is possessed of the more provocative content with the less endearing title; it is simply “What is Enlightenment?” as opposed to the exotic, “Kant on Enlightenment and revolution,” the name of the latter carrying far greater potential for readings on critique and resistance. As a necessary precursor to an examination of the interaction with Pynchon's fiction, a small amount of digressive exegesis is necessary; both of these works are best explained through their clear communal origin in Foucault's 1978 lecture, “What is Critique?”

Among Foucault's many retractions and retrospective amendments to his trajectory, the statement of his overarching purpose in “What is Critique?” seems among the most genuine: “The question [...] I have always wanted to speak about, is this: What is critique?”¹⁵ This rings true because, despite the opposition to the anthropological theme, the intuitive-conceptual dichotomy of the empirico-transcendental doublet, with its Kantian root, was awarded primacy of place in *The Order of Things*. Although Foucault uses much of this lecture to provide another foundation for his historicophilosophical method, he also here brings together two of his previous topics in order to construct a history of the critical attitude: governmentality and the Christian pastoral tradition. It is, in Foucault's account, the desire to be governed in specific ways that lead to a questioning of the underlying truth claims of the dominant mentality: “Was Scripture true?,” “What are the limits of the right to govern?”¹⁶ Critique for Foucault, at this stage, is “the movement through which the subject gives itself the right to question truth concerning its power effects and to question power about its discourses of truth”.¹⁷ Perversely, Foucault notes, this is not critique as Kant would describe it but is, instead, in line with Kant's definition of Enlightenment as coming of age and developing an

autocritical attitude.¹⁸ Foucault claims that it is now necessary to reverse this motion and re-situate critique within the Enlightenment structure, the relation between knowledge and domination. Critique becomes, for Foucault, the subset of the Enlightenment power/truth dispute within the epistemological realm. Foucault concludes: “You see why I was not able to give, to dare to give, a title to my paper which would have been 'What is Aufklärung?'”.¹⁹ The reason Foucault could not “dare” is that this piece boldly suggests Enlightenment as the practical implementation of Critique.

Yet dare he eventually did. Taken in order of authorship, the first of the two pieces Foucault produced under the same title “Qu'est-ce que les Lumières?” (DÉ351) has been translated as “Kant on Enlightenment and revolution” and was originally given as a 1983 Collège de France lecture; the published version is a mere fragment of the whole. In this lecture, Foucault ascribes to Kant – in a reading that Colin Gordon calls “altered” from Kant's original meaning²⁰ – the first instance of direct philosophical reflexivity upon a specific aspect of the contemporary: “What is there in the present which can have contemporary meaning for philosophical reflection?”²¹ Foucault claims that this “interrogation by philosophy of this present-ness of which it is part [...] may well be the characteristic trait of philosophy as a discourse of and upon modernity”.²² It is at this point that an engagement with Pynchon's themes can begin to be tabled.

Revolution

In the pre-release blurb to *Against the Day*, Pynchon wrote, with supreme irony: “No reference to the present day is intended or should be inferred”. Yet Pynchon's writing is directly centred on such notions of present-ness through historical specificities underwritten by trans-temporal metaphor; many, if not all his fictions query the present through historical genealogy and analogy. If it is accepted that Foucault's conflation of Critique and Enlightenment is an acknowledgement of the very problem for which he was criticised by Derrida – an immanence that nonetheless seeks totalising critique – this would also apply

equally to Pynchon's writing, rendering his anti-rationalism as a distinct product of Enlightenment thought; and why not? While *Gravity's Rainbow* warns – as almost every piece of high-postmodernist criticism on the text seems to note – of the hermeneutic heresies that would lead to “a good Rocket to take us to the stars, an evil Rocket for the World’s suicide, the two perpetually in struggle”²³, the co-mingling of truth, authority, questioning, governance and contemporaneity which are bracketed under acceptance or rejection of an Enlightenment framework does not have to be a binary choice in which one judgement is jettisoned.

While critics have noted the aversion to binary conditions in Pynchon's work – in keeping with much theoretical thought around this period – this is usually reduced to narratives of alterity, an ethical act in itself. However, Pynchon's depiction of the draw towards the dark side of humanity, Nazism and right-wing systems – perhaps best seen in the essentialist appeal Frenesi feels for Brock Vond in *Vineland* – suggests that this is embedded within human kind in an analogous conception to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment's* reciprocity of myth and Enlightenment; despite the negating movement towards destruction, it is within the other that the self finds its genesis. To begin, then, it is worth posing an ethical problem that comes to the fore in Pynchon's work when this paradigm of mutual germination, raised by Foucault's notion of Critique/Enlightenment, is considered. It may be, as *Against the Day's* Thelonious epigraph tells us “always night or we wouldn't need light”²⁴, but it is only through such a juxtaposition that light is valued. This is well demonstrated in *Gravity's Rainbow*, for, textually adjacent to Weissman's introduction of the terrible modifications to the 00000²⁵, Pökler demonstrates his worth as a human being:

Pökler found a woman lying, a random woman. He sat for half an hour holding her bone hand. She was breathing. Before he left, he took off his gold wedding ring and put it on the woman’s thin finger, curling her hand to keep it from sliding off. If she lived, the ring would be good for a few meals, or a blanket, or a night indoors, or a ride home...

Humanity salvaged, perhaps, but only, it must be noted, in the place “[w]here it was darkest

and smelled the worst".²⁶ This relativistic, almost structuralist, dialectic of Pynchonian ethics presents a world that differs sharply from, for instance, David Grossman's prayer for the Children of the Heart at the close of *See Under: Love*. In this novel, another that radically re-represents the Holocaust through magical realist tropes such as the Jew who cannot die, a positivist utopia is craved in which a child could live from birth to death and "know nothing of war".²⁷ One of the more disturbing conclusions of Pynchon's Enlightenment-rooted discourse upon the contemporary, though, at the first point of ethical crossover in this parallel reading, is that it is all too easy to see a world in which there is a requisite need for war and misery so that virtue may become apparent or, of course, the inverse: were vice not inherent, there would be no need for virtue.

This ethical problem, situated at Adorno's terminus of enlightenment, the concentration camp, begs the question: how can the modern subject effectively resist, rebel or revolt? If this initial query into Pynchon's stance on contemporary ethics came about through a consideration of Foucault's reading of the central problem in Kant, it is worth turning to his work again to begin the quest for a solution, for in Foucault's against-the-grain reading of Kant on revolution, "it is not the revolutionary process itself which is important". Indeed, Foucault goes on: "Never mind whether it succeed or fail, that is nothing to do with progress or a sign that there is no progress". In Foucault's interpretation of Kant, "What matters in the Revolution is not the Revolution itself, it is what takes place in the heads of the people who do not make it or in any case are not its principle actors, it is the relation they themselves experience with this Revolution of which they are not themselves the active agents".²⁸ As Colin Gordon points out, Foucault's earlier remarks on revolution were optimistic²⁹; by this late stage – most likely tempered by his ill-fated comments on the Iranian revolution – the hope for tangible change in an instant of "event" had faded, it is now to come to gradual fruition through a seemingly democratically-driven paradigm shift.

Pynchon's stance towards revolution and resistance has been insightfully probed by

Samuel Thomas in the most influential publication of Pynchon criticism of recent times: *Pynchon and the Political*. In his chapter on u-/dys- tobian alterity in *Vineland*, Thomas troubles a reading of the Kunoichi ninja sisterhood through Schmidt's friend/foe politics by demonstrating the unbridgeable divide between violence as idea or alienated representation, and violence as lived reality.³⁰ I would like to draw attention, though, to the quotation that Thomas uses in his synopsis of the ninja episode as it has major implications for Pynchon's interaction with this late-stage Foucault: "Those you will be fighting—those you must resist—they are neither samurai nor ninja. They are sarariman, incrementalists, who cannot act boldly and feel only contempt for those who can".³¹

This statement at once takes polemic aim at the proletarian wage slaves while simultaneously recognizing them, in their description as "incrementalists," as the people who, in Foucault's reading of Kant, truly hold the key to the revolution. Indeed, the dual senses deployed across author and theorist here on the term "incrementalist" mirrors that of freedom in the constraint/neo-liberal (or "freedom to" vs. "freedom from") dichotomy. In one reading – taking Pynchon, inadvisably given Thomas' work, literally – incrementalism is a stuttering of praxis, a cowardly inability to act. In the face of this, the only alternative lies in the power-moves of the ass-kicking ninjettes. The literal Pynchonian voice yields the masses as the voice of hegemony. The second, Foucauldian reading of an ironic Pynchon, to move dialectically, runs counter to this, but not antithetically. The masses still hold sway, but here it is by the incremental introduction of the will to revolution – rooted in the Enlightenment freedom from self-incurred minority – that change will come about. In *Vineland* this mode of revolution is well understood by Hector Zuñiga who demonstrates how real change works when he tells Zoyd Wheeler: "this ain't tweakín around no more with no short-term maneuvers here, this is a real revolution, not that little fantasy hand-job you people was into, it's a groundswell, Zoyd, the wave of History, and you can catch it, or scratch it".³² Although Zuñiga is an ethically conflicted character, a precursor of Bigfoot in the later *Inherent Vice*, and is here describing the

movement of right-wing government, in the context of the failure of the countercultural movement to effect long-term change, his view on the definition of real “revolution” seems to hold. Under such a reading, the violent approach is clearly reactionary and acting against its stated purpose, surely also of importance for any work on terrorism in *Against the Day*. In a compare-and-contrast scenario, it is easy to see that, fundamentally, there is a democratic strain at play here. The former of these readings effects a self-effacing critique of democracy, following through the overwriting logic of: 1.) positing a revolutionary force against a hegemonic mass; 2.) undermining the authority of that revolutionary force through the mimetic/reality violence split posited by Thomas. The latter reading begins with enlightened democracy as its *petitio principii*, but with no guarantee of eventual praxis; the classic Foucauldian freedom paradox of environmental constitution against free will that leads Foucault, as shall be seen, to narrow the ethical sphere to the self.

For Foucault's Kant, then, Enlightenment is not the event, the revolution that causes change; it is the spark kindled among the damp tinder of the populous with no more impact than a smouldering. It exists with only the forever-deferred future hope of fire. Is Pynchon, the Slow Burner perhaps, so very far away from such a stance? As Thomas points out, it is foolhardy and impractical to read Pynchon as straightforwardly endorsing a revolutionary event; the boundaries between the representation and reality of violence forbid this. Yet, conversely, there is a degree of permeability between mimesis and its object that runs through all Pynchon's novels in the form of hope, for consider von Göll's “seeds of reality” in *Gravity's Rainbow*, or the debate in *Vineland*'s 24fps: “‘Film equals sacrifice,’ declared Ditzah Pisk. / ‘You don't die for no motherfuckin' shadows,’ Sledge replied”.³³ Such an appraisal lends itself to viewing Pynchon's novel as one that takes a post-Utopian frame in which, according to Marianne Dekoven, the Utopian project is constantly “defeated and discredited” but continues in its “desire for elimination of domination, inequality and oppression,” an aspect also ably explored by Madeline Ostrander whose couching of *Vineland* as post-Utopian brings the

hopeful hopelessness of Pynchon's work to the fore.³⁴ In this persistent hope, despite the failure of modernity, despite the failure of America, despite the failure of fiction, Pynchon begins to finally align, more closely than might have been supposed, with Foucault's will-to-revolution, which perhaps itself holds out a form of refuge from the failure of theory. Enlightenment and revolution constitute at once event, permanent process and unrealistic hope that appears, in its positivity as a Utopian regulative idea, to rescue Pynchon's work from a world that requires evil. If the regulative idea can be thought in a perfected state, the dialectic can foresee its own finality, even though this remains impossible.

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The second of Foucault's Enlightenment pieces presents a complement to the first, providing the promised close reading of Kant's article, which, although acknowledged as a "minor text,"³⁵ is still not quite on par with Nietzsche's laundry list in the lowbrow stakes. By way of broad synopsis, Foucault's article is structured into two sections and a brief conclusion. The first of these sections is very much a restatement of the notion of philosophy found in the preceding text; Kant as the threshold of modernity wherein all post-Kantian philosophical thought possesses a degree of historicity and reflexivity upon the present. The second portion of Foucault's essay is still derived from the lecture, but is substantially more interesting for both its extension and refinement of terms.

In this second section, Foucault seeks to define "modernity as an attitude rather than as a period of history," a statement clarified as a way "of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task". It is, in short, "a bit like what the Greeks called an *ēthos*," beginning to make explicit the ethical connotations that had lain implied throughout the preceding piece.³⁶ Foucault then extends this period of modernity under Kant into the notions of modernity as he sees them relayed by Baudelaire in *The Painter of Modern Life*. Under this schema, Foucault sees an ironic heroization of the present, in which the contemporary is consecrated so that, in its elevation, it becomes possible

to imagine it otherwise. This reimagination of the present moves from *ēthos* to ethic when the modern subject, in this mode of creative refashioning, is redefined as one who undertakes “to face the task of producing himself,” a production that can only take place “in another, a different place, which Baudelaire calls art”.³⁷ Negatively defining Enlightenment, Foucault still seeks, at this point, to effect a critical relation which avoids what he terms the “Enlightenment blackmail” – under which one is forced to judge the Enlightenment as good or evil – and which does not conflate humanism and Enlightenment. In positive terms, Foucault situates the Enlightenment ethos as the transformation of Kantian critique into a lived exploration of “*limit-attitude*,” to change it “into a practical critique that takes the form of a possible crossing-over”. This leads to the necessity for a historicised critique, to avoid the universal values that are bestowed by criticism that seeks atemporal formal structures, a critique that must also be experimental: “I shall thus characterize the philosophical ethos appropriate to the critical ontology of ourselves as a historico-practical test of the limits we may go beyond, and thus as work carried out by ourselves upon ourselves as free beings”.³⁸ From here on, the revolution is personal.

Iipseic Ethics

Much of Pynchon's historicity lends itself to a reading in this vein. A way of re-conceptualising the anachronistic mode in *Mason & Dixon*, for example, would be to situate the characters as possessing a heightened sense of their modernity, at the dawn of that modernity. Furthermore, several of Pynchon's novels end on an ironic heroization of the present, mostly because the present, or future, is apocalyptic, be it in *Gravity's Rainbow's* faux optimistic “Now everybody–,” *Vineland's* and *Inherent Vice's* elegiac fogs for the Sixties, or *Against the Day's* airborne sailing towards the “grace” of World War II and contemporary capitalism, an element that seems to symmetrically parallel the earlier nautical climax/disaster in *V.* However, one of the most prominent critiques that could be levelled at Pynchon's work is that such an ironic heroization is not deployed to imagine otherwise, but to nihilistically mourn

and nostalgically lament for a repeated cycle of failure. This has been none more so pronounced than in Slothrop's disintegration in *Gravity's Rainbow*:

Slothrop, as noted, at least as early as the Anubis era, has begun to thin, to scatter. "Personal density," Kurt Mondaugen in his Peenemünde office not too many steps away from here, enunciating the Law which will one day bear his name, "is directly proportional to temporal bandwidth."

"Temporal bandwidth" is the width of your present, your now. It is the familiar "At" considered as a dependent variable. The more you dwell in the past and in the future, the thicker your bandwidth, the more solid your persona. But the narrower your sense of Now, the more tenuous you are. It may get to where you're having trouble remembering what you were doing five minutes ago, or even—as Slothrop now—what you're doing here, at the base of this colossal curved embankment. . . .³⁹

This is, of course, one of the most oft-cited passages in *Gravity's Rainbow*; in the period between 1975 and 1981 alone, no fewer than six critical articles found it symptomatic of a disempowered contemporary subject. Tony Tanner remarks upon it that "[a]lthough there is an excessive proliferation of names in Pynchon's work, there is a concomitant disappearance of selves," citing Pynchon's novels as places in which we are "likely to find a study of not just failure and loss, but the radical disassembling of character".⁴⁰ Others such as Lance Ozier, following in the footsteps of Joseph Slade, remark upon the problems in reading Slothrop's disassembly either positively or negatively; in its conflation with preterition it only embraces alterity at the cost of the subject, although Ozier eventually concludes that this loss "opens Slothrop to the possibility of pure Being".⁴¹ Finally, Steven Weisenburger points out the importance, aesthetically, for Pynchon of keeping one's temporal bandwidth as wide as possible and, for this, Slothrop should be judged; the Fool, indeed. It is also crucial to note, however, that Weisenburger writes: "One's grasp of the Now as a moment having links to the past and future is, in Pynchon's view, a willed action, and quite free".⁴²

Although this passage has been debated *ad nauseum* in Pynchon studies, its importance for thinking on freedom and ethics within an Enlightenment context will continue to merit critical attention. Through a consideration of Pynchon as depicting a being on the true

edge of limit-existence alongside the initial complication of Pynchon as a product of modernity in the Enlightenment telos, comes a stunning resonance with late Foucault's aforementioned statement on philosophical ethos: "a historico-practical test of the limits we may go beyond, and thus as work carried out by ourselves upon ourselves as free beings".⁴³ The relationship one has to oneself, which the late Foucault believes is the true sphere of ethics, is the area with the greatest scope for agency for the historically contingent subject. As shall be seen, in Pynchon, this is intricately bound to Sloth. Given also that Pynchon has written in *praise* of Sloth – with particular reference to Melville's *Bartleby* as a refusal of the capitalist paradigm – it would appear hugely inconsistent for Pynchon to judge his nominatively assonative protagonist for refusing to work, even if that work is on the relationship to himself, through time. However, it could be asked, in fact, whether Slothrop's "sin" is a refusal to work upon himself against the disintegration of the subject in a blindness to history.

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It would seem superficially, from his essay on Sloth – "Nearer my Couch to Thee" – that a Pynchonian ethics cannot regard inaction as unethical. Pynchon begins this work with an examination of Thomas de Aquinas' concept of *acedia* as sorrow in the face of God's good. However, Pynchon quickly moves through the historical progression to see, in Franklin's Poor Richard, a transformation of Sloth from a sin of sorrow in the face of God's good, to one of sorrow in the face of capitalism's good:

Spiritual matters were not quite as immediate as material ones, like productivity! Sloth was no longer so much a Sin against God or spiritual good as against a particular sort of time, uniform, one-way, in general not reversible -- that is, against clock time, which got everybody early to bed and early to rise.⁴⁴

Sloth here becomes a transgressive act that violates the compulsion to productive action and is, therefore, a form of resistance. Of course, such a stance is troubling from our contemporary viewpoint of Sloth as a failure to act against political evil, and Pynchon understands this:

In this century we have come to think of Sloth as primarily political, a failure of public will allowing the introduction of evil policies and the rise of evil regimes, the worldwide fascist ascendancy of the 1920's and 30's being perhaps Sloth's finest hour, though the Vietnam era and the Reagan-Bush years are not far behind. [...] Occasions for choosing good present themselves in public and private for us every day, and we pass them by. Acedia is the vernacular of everyday moral life.

As one might expect, then, Pynchon does not present a unified stance on Sloth. In one capacity, or perhaps at one historical moment, Sloth offered an escape from linear time; it was the resistance. Somewhere along this line of thought, however, the process was reversed and Sloth became seen as complicit. The only linking factor between these historical periods has been a moral disdain towards Sloth by authority. However, Sloth in itself cannot be a universal sin, in Pynchon's view, because it turns upon an evaluation of the contingent underlying moral concept. This is, in fact, the same argument that Aquinas deployed for a universal injunction against Sloth and with which Pynchon begins in apparent antagonism: "For sorrow is evil in itself when it is about that which is apparently evil but good in reality, even as, on the other hand, pleasure is evil if it is about that which seems to be good but is, in truth, evil".⁴⁵ The actual alignment here can be seen, however, even in the working title of *Gravity's Rainbow*, "Mindless Pleasures," in which there is the conflation of Aquinian thinking/confusion ("mindless" / "which seems to be") with ascetic morality ("pleasures"). In short, the stance that can be derived from the Sloth essay is that Pynchonian morality comes down to judgement of a contingent action's validity while Aquinian morality proposes a universal action as a safeguard against misjudgement.

Understanding Pynchon as one who disavows universally valid moral action, this reading moves a step-closer to a Foucauldian "historico-practical test of the limits we may go beyond," but with an important inflection. First, it should be carefully noted that this brand of relativism is diametrically opposed to the conventional genealogy of morals; it is not the underlying moral precept (opposition to Fascism, opposition to oppression) that is relative – indeed, this is still an open possibility, but not explicitly touched upon in Pynchon's essay – but

instead, the action one should take (it is wrong to be slothful when Sloth will permit Fascism, but it is not wrong to be slothful if Sloth counters oppression/works against linear time). In this sense, Pynchon does not present the conventional and oft-critiqued, although not entirely accurate, version of a Foucauldian contingent subject, but rather the later Foucauldian subject of modernity who fashions himself and for whom there is limited personal agency.

Yet, the second half of Foucault's proposition – the imperative to work upon oneself as a free being – is not an area in which Slothrop excels. While he does indeed, in his scattering and disassembly, transcend the human's limits, his realm of agency is seriously limited: he is “sent into the Zone,” his fate as determined as Weissman's by the tarot and his subconscious; “to help him deny what he could not possibly admit: that he might be in love, in sexual love, with his, and his race's, death”.⁴⁶ This portion of *Gravity's Rainbow* is, however, enveloped in an exceedingly complex narrative structure. The voice proclaiming that Slothrop's fate was bound up in esoteric tarot systems cuts, across the ellipses, to “world-renowned analyst Mickey Wuxtry-Wuxtry” for the restriction of agency via psychoanalysis, before moving to an unexpected format, an interview of a “spokesman for the Counterforce” with the *Wall Street Journal*. This relegation of Slothrop to third party discussion is in keeping with the high frequency of low level linguistic transitivity – a feature examined in “Under the Rose” and *V.* by M. Angeles Martínez⁴⁷ – and, therefore, agency throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*; consider, for instance, the famous passage:

The letters:

MB DRO
ROSHI

appear above the logo of some occupation newspaper, a grinning glamour girl riding astraddle the cannon of a tank⁴⁸

Rather than presenting this as a statement actively read by Slothrop, the sentence contains only an affected object intransitively appearing; certainly an apt representation for such a

brutal event as an atomic bombing.

It is not necessary, however, to resort to such formalist transitivity analysis to see this constriction of agency. The Counterforce has been styled – in as parodic a fashion as though it were, itself, named “Wuxtry-Wuxtry” – as childlike throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*. Furthermore, although Terry Caesar has linked the “suck hour” in *V.* and the “Gross Suckling Conference”⁴⁹ in *Gravity's Rainbow* to maternity, it is in fact the flip-side of this relationship that is being explored, with all its implications for Kantian Enlightenment and immaturity: the state of childhood.⁵⁰ This is clearly seen in the linked context of *Against the Day* where Darby Suckling is described, in the opening pages, as the “baby” of the crew⁵¹, leading to the more likely conclusion that “Gross Suckling” is less of a reflection on the transition from maternity to motherhood, and more a statement on the immaturity, or baby-ness, of the Counterforce effort, further confirmed by the German rendition: “Der Grob Säugling”.⁵² The Counterforce, in its childlike autocritical ignorance, is as incapable of commenting on Slothrop's limitations as any other, for “They are schizoid, as double-minded in the massive presence of money, as any of the rest of us”; they have not come of age in the sense of Kantian maturity.⁵³ It appears that, in Pynchon's terms, as Hanjo Berressem and Samuel Thomas both point out, human beings are psychologically incapable of mounting a resistance in the face of external temptation: “As long as they allow us a glimpse, however rarely. We need that”.⁵⁴ While this in no sense precludes agency in the relation to one's self, it does encroach upon the impact such a self-fashioning could ever have and also enmeshes external, fiscalised motivations in the construction of this relationship. The individual, even in the relationship to the self, even when acting positively in a limit-attitude, becomes ethically contaminated.

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The final portion of Foucault's last Enlightenment piece is a pre-emptive rebuff to a “no doubt entirely legitimate” objection to his mode of enquiry: “If we limit ourselves to this type of always partial and local inquiry or test, do we not run the risk of letting ourselves be

determined by more general structures of which we may well not be conscious and over which we may have no control?" To this, Foucault gives two responses. We must, firstly, "give up hope of ever acceding to a point of view that could give us access to any complete and definitive knowledge [*connaissance*] or what may constitute our historical limits". From here, "the theoretical and practical experience we have of our limits, and of the possibility of moving beyond them, is always limited and determined". However, "that does not mean that no work can be done except in disorder and contingency," it must instead be probed in the question: "how can the growth of capabilities [*capacités*] be disconnected from the intensification of power relations?" This can only be studied by analysing concrete practices consisting of the "forms of rationality that organize their ways of doing things" ("their technological side") and the actions of subjects which reflexively modify this *techne* ("their strategic side"). This is to be explored through "relations of control over things" ("the axis of knowledge"), "relations of action upon others" ("the axis of power") and "relations with oneself" ("the axis of ethics").⁵⁵

This brings focus, then, to the aporetic final structure upon which Pynchon's works come to rest. Even if we are able, in some sense, to determine ourselves as subjects, partial knowledge means there is always the potential for larger, unknown structures to impinge upon that determination with little opportunity for feedback. Amid ever narrowing opportunities for the "good unsought and uncompensated"⁵⁶ – for how would we know them? – which technologies of the self are possible? Is a Voltarian hortensial contraction or ἀναχώρησις [*anakhoresis* (withdrawal)] even viable? Foucault suggests that maintaining a positivist approach is feasible, on condition that an effort to decouple progress from the amplification of power relations remains. On the other hand, Pynchon's intrinsic linkage of the spheres of identity and concrete practices, that Foucault here separates, is clear from his closing remarks in "Nearer My Couch to Thee": "what now seems increasingly to define us – technology". This has the effect of extending the sphere of the ethical beyond the Foucauldian axis of an aesthetic, self-fashioning ethics; ipseic relations are not disentangled from, but progressively

knotted into the world, to paraphrase *Gravity's Rainbow*. Furthermore, the strategic elements, the failed Counterforce, the Chums of Chance, Mason and Dixon are not foiled because they are unaware of the overarching structures that determine them, but because from Pynchon's psychological, humanist essentialism it is deduced that they are intrinsically incapable of non-complicity and a discrediting of Foucault's localized blindness: "We do know what's going on, and we let it go on".⁵⁷

Pynchon's interaction with this late-stage Foucault is far more nuanced than casual dismissals would credit. This engagement highlights troubling ethical aspects in Pynchon's fiction, but also allows for a more detailed analysis of Pynchon's utopianism as a regulative idea. In moving beyond Pynchon as a mere antirationalist and situating the production of his works in an Enlightenment tradition that has dialectically resolved towards irrationality, supposed outright support for violent resistance can be further queried, an aspect that has important future implications for work on Pynchon and democracy. Coming finally to counter the early protests and resistance to Foucault in Pynchon criticism, in regard to the seamy underside of the Enlightenment and the sphere of ethics pertaining to the self, the divide between Pynchon and Foucault seems to hinge on what we can know about ourselves and not necessarily, as has always been supposed, on who, or how, we can dominate. Pynchon's stance on revolution and resistance runs broadly in line with late Foucault's remarks on incrementalism; any change that can come about will, and should, be incremental while remaining pessimistic towards Meliorism. The narrowing of the sphere of ethics to ipseity that Foucault introduces to effectively counter the problems of agency that this entails, however, are not shared by Pynchon. For Pynchon, work upon the self is intrinsically contaminated and cannot be clearly delineated from the wider, impinging systems; Pynchon's *gnothi seauton* (know thyself) and *epimeleia heautou* (care of the self) are not portrayed as relating purely to the self. In this consideration of a different Enlightenment tradition, it is necessary to ask whose Line is it anyway, and what is happening in that specific tradition? With apologies, then,

to Thomas Pynchon, it seems fair to say that when reading Pynchon in the Foucauldian Enlightenment tradition: we do know what's going on (to some, perhaps ingrained and inescapably limited, extent), and we let it go on, imagining in sorrow how it could (never) be otherwise.

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- 4Ibid., p. 158.
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- 6Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1997), 194.
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- 23Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, p. 727.
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- 28Foucault, "Kant on Enlightenment and revolution," p. 15.
- 29Gordon, "Question, ethos, event: Foucault on Kant and Enlightenment," pp. 22-23.
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- 31Thomas Pynchon, *Vineland* (London: Minerva, 1991), 127; Thomas, *Pynchon and the Political*, p. 139.
- 32Pynchon, *Vineland*, p. 27.

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