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Pynchon and Wittgenstein: Ethics, Relativism and Philosophical Methodology

Perhaps the strongest rationale for a philosophico-literary study intersecting Thomas Pynchon with Ludwig Wittgenstein is that, in the writings of this philosopher, the very nature of philosophy is reflexively questioned. Within his lifetime Wittgenstein published a single text, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, influenced by the logical atomists in which he claimed, initially, to have “solved all the problems of philosophy” (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* x). However, in 1929 he resumed lecturing and, following his death in 1951, the world was presented with the unfinished product of these intervening years: the *Philosophical Investigations*. While many early studies, and indeed this biographical overview, present a seemingly bi-polar, bi-tonal Wittgenstein, who enacts a retraction of the *Tractatus* in the *Philosophical Investigations*, a closer examination of Wittgenstein's notebooks and intermediate remarks reveals that the latter owes its genesis to a critique of the former and was developed through an accumulation of thought and a gradual transition.

This piece presents a tripartite analysis of the relationship between the philosophical works of Ludwig Wittgenstein and the novels of Thomas Pynchon. This is broadly structured around three schools of Wittgenstein scholarship identified by Guy Kahane et al. as the Orthodox *Tractatus*, the New Wittgenstein, and several strands of the Orthodox *Investigations* (Kahane et al. 4-14). Moving from the earliest affiliation that Pynchon stages between Wittgenstein and Weissman, the underlying theme lies in Pynchon's relationship to ethical relativism as it pertains to Nazism. From this it will become clear that neither relativism of experience and representation, nor an unbounded relativism of non-committal

ethics, are central to Pynchon's fiction.

Of equal importance is the need to pose some preliminary challenges to the methodology of interdisciplinary work on philosophy/Theory and literary studies. The traditional approach tends to infer a deep parity of thought from mere surface similitude, a grasping of an image which must embody the whole philosophical work, an “application” of philosophy as a validating Other to literature. While there has been a greater tendency in recent works towards a historicizing approach, this is also not without its flaws. Under such a method, it would be assumed that Pynchon has read Wittgenstein, or that some form of shared historical geist is the prerequisite for the possibility of both their writings. Regardless of the truth of these sentiments, the genesis and conclusion are coerced along a parallel course because at a superficial level their work exhibits thematic alignment. In contrast, I suggest the path to be taken must tread the space between these chasms of “application” and “historicity”. Where philosophico-literary thematics are historically rooted in a period, this should be noted and deployed, but not necessarily to the same endpoint. Where conclusions or interpretational resonances coincide, the process should not be inferred from a common origination of a shared teleological arc. In short, the tangential line of philosophy must be approached at the point of intersection with its literary curve. Their convergences and differences must be explained historically, neither ceding to a contingency upon biographical speculation or literary influence, nor using this very field as a catch-all for an entirely absolute axis of disconnected non-identity.

The Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus and V.

There has been a tendency in existing Wittgensteinian commentary on Pynchon to rely exclusively on the early Gordon Baker's and P.M.S. Hacker's “orthodox” interpretation of *Tractatus*

Logico-Philosophicus, presented retrospectively through their colossal body of analytical scholarship on the *Philosophical Investigations*. This stance sees Wittgenstein's early work as the outcome of an inheritance from Frege and Russell which delineates the interrelation between language, the world and the mystical. In turn, this hinges upon a distinction between the speakable and the showable; that which is in language, and that which is subject only to ostensive definition: Wittgenstein's ineffable. Overall, the key tenet of the orthodox interpretation of the *Tractatus* is that, regardless of whether one sees it as an Early/Late divide in the published works, or as a graduated transition, Wittgenstein holds one set of views in the *Tractatus* which are then undermined by the *Philosophical Investigations*. The evidence for such a view is historical as well as interpretative, with Wittgenstein himself writing of the “grave mistakes” in “that first book” (*Philosophical Investigations* x).

Wittgenstein appears explicitly only in Pynchon's first novel *V.*, in which the primary focus is the *Tractatus*. As Grant and Pittas-Giroux note, however, Pynchon problematizes this presentation by going so far as to make reference to a non-existent portion of Wittgenstein's text; the mythical Proposition 1.7 (Grant 143). Nevertheless, the sites of direct reference can be clearly stated: the text of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 1 appears in “Chapter Nine: Mondaugen's Story” (*V.* 278); the *Tractatus* is bandied about in chapter ten (*V.* 288-289); and Wittgenstein is named by Rachel Owlglass in chapter thirteen (*V.* 380). Additionally, David Seed highlights a potential reference in the name “Slab” which could point to the analysis of imperatives at *Philosophical Investigations* §20 (Seed 75) and finally – venturing outside *V.* – the Ineffable Tetractys of *Against the Day* could allude to the Wittgensteinian unsayable. Each of these references is, however, embedded within a context and the shifting allegiances of every speaker constitute the stratified characterization of Wittgenstein in *V.*

The most widely examined Wittgensteinian moment in *V.* is Lieutenant Weissman's triumphant declaration that he has unravelled the “code” which Kurt Mondaugen believes to be embedded within the atmospheric disturbances. Weissman's decoded message, derived through an unspecified cryptanalytical methodology, reads:

“DIGEWOELDTIMSTEALALENSWTASNDEURFUALRLIKST”. As Weissman continues: “I remove every third letter and obtain: GODMEANTNURRK. This rearranged spells Kurt Mondaugen. [...] The remainder of the message [...] now reads: DIEWELTISTALLESWASDERFALLIST”; the first line of the *Tractatus*. Mondaugen's initial response is, to put it homophonously, curt: “I've heard that somewhere before” (*V.* 278).

To make contextual sense of this reference, several aspects of the citation require unpicking. To begin: from where does the message originate? Is this the opinion of Weissman, a solipsistic world view derived from Weissman's own interpretative bias, or truly an atmospheric message? Yet, such questioning relies upon tenuous assumptions relating to Pynchon's use of character. It is often noted that Pynchon's characters appear two dimensional, an impression formed because they engage in less protracted dialogue, with fewer moments of narrationally privileged empathetic introspection. Instead, they act as functional components, established through connections within domains of an allegorical text. As shall be seen, Pynchon establishes these domains predominantly through repeated narrative interjection of specific phrases, character interaction and textual proximity between characters.

Weissman is, under this model, a limited *artistic device* and, therefore, must be treated with specificity. Any Wittgensteinian relation in *V.* must be determined, in part, through Weissman's localized interaction with specific philosophies and by ascertaining his domain and textual identity,

rather than “motive”. In this sense, Pynchon's placement of Weissman in a certain relation to Wittgenstein primarily expresses that very relation. Indeed, this is the logic of which Wittgenstein writes: “[i]nstead of, 'The complex sign 'aRb' says that *a* stands to *b* in the relation *R*', we ought to put, “That '*a*' stands to '*b*' in a certain relation says *that aRb*” (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 3.1432). The juxtaposition of Weissman and Wittgenstein therefore queries the politics of the *Tractatus*, asking which systems would appropriate, or are legitimated by, this school of philosophy. While this system of “domains” must strike a balance between paranoia, anti-paranoia and formalism, it is no longer feasible to ignore these connections, despite the infeasibility of quantifiably mapping their bounds.

Who, then, is Weissman? Weissman is the character otherwise known as Captain Blicero in *Gravity's Rainbow*; the sadistic Nazi responsible for the launch of Rocket 00000 and its sacrificial load. However, even in *V*, Weissman's tendencies towards extreme right-wing politics are manifest in his interrogation of Mondaugen on “D'Annunzio,” “Mussolini,” “Fascisti,” the “National Socialist German Workers' Party,” and “Hitler” (*V*. 242). Weissman is also instrumental in the conflation of the Nazi regime and the German Südwest during Foppl's Siege Party. He not only foresees and approves of the collapse of the League of Nations and a return to German colonialist supremacy (*V*. 243), but also appears contiguous to the scene of Hedwig's entrance riding a Bondel (*V*. 265). The cumulative effect of this evidence builds a horrific awareness of the genocidal drive enacted by von Trotha against the Herero population in 1904, but also, as Katalin Orbán and others have noted (162), provides a referent for the Nazi death camps. Pynchon, in his aside quip – “[t]his is only 1 per cent of six million, but still pretty good” – relativizes the Holocaust (*V*. 245).

Such relativity entails grave ethical problems. *V*. was written at the apex of Postmodern

Historiography, best embodied, as Shawn Smith has argued (Smith 6), by the work of Hayden White. White, known primarily for the extension of Hegelian emplotment advanced in *Metahistory*, suggests that there is essentially only a single difference between narrative history and fiction: the claim to truth (*Metahistory* 93-97). As a causal chain is constructed between the events of the chronology, White claims the emergence of “an inexpugnable relativity in every representation of historical phenomena,” a relativity that “is a function of the language used to describe and thereby constitute past events as possible objects of explanation and understanding” (“Historical Emplotment” 37). Such statements, when revolving around the Holocaust, have found poor reception among those with the greatest right to specify the appropriate modes of representation: the survivors. Perhaps the most uncompromising of these voices is that of Elie Wiesel who believes not only in the absolutism of his experience, but also in its quale-like inexpressibility: “only those who lived it in their flesh and in their minds can possibly transform their experiences into knowledge. Others, despite their best intentions, can never do so” (166). This is an area which must be treated with the utmost sensitivity and one to which the scope of this piece cannot truly do justice. However, such issues of experiential relativism must be raised at this point as they are clearly central to both Holocaust relativity and the concept of Private Language, which will be addressed later.

Returning, though, to Weissman and the political domain is clearly fascist/Nazi Europe – especially as it pertains to the Holocaust – with strong transatlantic ties. This is confirmed by Weissman's accusation that Mondaugen is among the “[p]rofessional traitors,” (V. 251) the refutation hinging upon a factor revisited in *Gravity's Rainbow*; Mondaugen claims that the listening device “[...] can't transmit [...] It's for receiving only [...]” (V. 251). This system is exactly the configuration that Weissman uses in his rocket launch for, as Gottfried goes to scream, he remembers that “they can't hear him” because there is “no radio back” (*Gravity's Rainbow* 758); “there's no return channel from

Gottfried to the ground” (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 751). Rather than establishing new, bi- or omnidirectional modes of time, history, life and causality, Weissman's (and America's) failed transcendence reconstitutes, through his politically and historically metonymic radio-link, the path towards right-wing politics and death, the “hopeless [...] one-way flow of European time” (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 723). As *Gravity’s Rainbow* puts it: “America was a gift from the invisible powers, a way of returning. But Europe refused it” (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 722). Europe's refusal of this new space – although this vision of America as an uninhabited continent to be colonised is itself deeply problematic – actually points towards a dissolution of American exceptionalism. If the colonial enterprise failed to generate a new system, a way back, a return, then Europe and America share a common course. The simplex nature of the Sferics in *V.* is clearly an alignment with this system of European time and falls under Weissman's domain.

Why, then, does Weissman cite Wittgenstein? The foremost consideration of *Tractarian* logic in relation to genocidal regimes is to be found in the Adornian critique of enlightenment, a critique which traces the path of rationality to industrialized killing and thus also impinges upon the ethics of representational relativism. The first instance of Adorno's famous dictum is in the context of an essay on the hypocrisy of cultural criticism:

To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely. (“Cultural Criticism” 34)

As a call for praxis, embedded in dialectical thought which recognizes its own boundaries of immanence and transcendence, Adorno's use of "barbaric" must be deemed ironic. If taken literally, Adorno would himself be a cultural critic who could "hardly avoid the imputation that he has the culture which culture lacks"; he would be purporting false transcendence ("Cultural Criticism" 17). Instead, the dictum proposes that the knowledge/certainty of the *rationale* for the impossibility of poetry (positivist rationality) is eaten away by that very impossibility, for what can now stand to resist an infinite proliferation of such "intellectual progress"? This does not preclude the impossibility of poetry, but through the irony of the cultured-barbarian "narrator," acceptance of such an impossibility leads to self incrimination; to brand as barbarous is to contaminate oneself with barbarousness. Adorno's "dictum," so often used as uni-directional causal logic for the failure of art and culture, is actually a cyclical indictment of humanity's universal infection.

Furthermore, the antiserum required for such toxicity is an impossible regression. According to Adorno, situated at the terminus of "the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism" is a paradigm of "absolute reification" which must inevitably produce, as its endgame symptom, Auschwitz ("Cultural Criticism" 34). Revisiting these remarks, Adorno furthered this concept, stating that "genocide is the absolute integration. It is on its way wherever men are leveled off" and that "Auschwitz confirmed the philosopheme of pure identity as death." Pure identity is an "indifference [to] each individual life," an indifference that is, with a resonance to Pynchon's European-time, "the direction of history" (*Negative Dialectics* 362). Adorno's conceptualization of autonomous art is one which documents this movement of history towards the "abdication of the subject" through an arousal of "fear" ("Commitment" 190-191). It becomes impossible and perverse to represent human suffering because "the aesthetic principle of stylization [... makes] an unthinkable fate appear to have had some meaning; [...] something of its horror is removed," which "does an injustice to the victims"

(“Commitment” 189). Instead, an autonomous work remains critical, revealing the hidden “it should be otherwise,” pointing to the “practice” from which it must “abstain: the creation of a just life” (“Commitment” 194). Autonomous art, for Adorno, must abandon its intent to represent in language an experience that is inherently private to the victim.

V. prominently features such reification, most explicitly through the Lady V.'s theorization of the fetish: “So you know what a fetish is? Something of a woman which gives pleasure but is not a woman. A shoe, a locket... une jarretière. You are the same, not real but an object of pleasure” (V. 404). Furthermore, the S&M-scene outfits that the Lady V. brings into play (V. 407) resonate strongly with the voyeuristic experience of Kurt Mondaugen who encounters “Vera Meroving and her lieutenant [...] she striking at his chest with what appeared to be a small riding crop, he twisting a gloved hand into her hair” (V. 238). The reification principle at play in this sado-masochistic episode is a microcosm of the dehumanizing logic employed by Nazism and humanity's psychological drive towards such systems. As the leading exponent of that regime, Weissman exhibits the dependence on S&M that Pynchon will later claim in *Gravity's Rainbow* is the entire foundation of oppressive right-wing state apparatus:

Why will the Structure allow every other kind of sexual behavior but that one? Because submission and dominance are resources it needs for its very survival. [...] It needs our submission so that it may remain in power. It needs our lusts after dominance so that it can co-opt us into its own power game. (*Gravity's Rainbow* 736)

With the identity of Weissman established in the realms of Adorno's “absolute reification,” the stage is set for a production that equates the process of objectification with transit to the death camps.

To answer the question arching over this section, however, it must be noted that there are also strong elements of this very objectification in Wittgenstein's text, which equates the structure of the world with the structure of language (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 6.13). This can be seen in the amalgamation of three *Tractarian* propositions which paint an essentially bleak view for human agency and which form Plater's early reading of a Wittgensteinian Pynchon (Plater 42): “the case – a fact – is the existence of states of affairs” (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 2); a “state of affairs [...] is a combination of objects (things)” (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 2.01); and, most crucially, “[t]he world is independent of my will” (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 6.373). Humans are objects in states of affairs which are distanced from any logical causation of will. This disillusionment with the role humankind can play in its own existence seriously troubles a Wittgensteinian reading of *V.* that searches for ethical agency, for “[e]ven if all that we wish for were to happen, still this would only be a favour granted by fate” (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 6.374).

However, *V.* contains multiple presentations of Wittgenstein and the association between the negative portrayal of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* with the right-wing Weissman appears to resurface in the less aggressive form of a parody song, voiced with “*Tractatus* in hand”:

It is something less than heaven
 To be quoted in Thesis 1.7
 Every time I make an advance;
 If the world is all that the case is
 That' a pretty discouraging basis
 On which to pursue
 Any sort of romance.
 I've got a proposition for you;
 Logical positive and brief.
 And at least it could serve as a kind of comic relief:

(Refrain)

Let P equal me,
 With my heart in command;
 Let Q equal you
 With Tractatus in hand;
 And R could stand for a lifetime of love,
 Filled with music to fondle and purr to.
 We'll define love as anything lovely you'd care to infer to
 On the right, put that bright,
 Hypothetical case;
 On the left, our unleft,
 Parenthetical chase
 And that horseshoe there in the middle
 Could be lucky; we've nothing to lose,
 If in these parentheses
 We just mind our little P's
 And Q's.

If P (Mafia sang in reply) thinks of me
 As a girl hard to make,
 Then Q wishes you would go jump in the lake.
 For R is a meaningless concept,
 Having nothing to do with pleasure:
 I prefer the hard and tangible things I can measure
 Man, you chase in the face
 Of impossible odds;
 I'm a lass in the class
 Of unbossable broads.
 If you promise me no more sticky phrases,
 Half a mo while I kick of my shoes.
 There are birds, there are bees,
 And to hell with all your P's
 And Q's. (V. 289-290)

Pynchon's counterargument to logical positivism within this light-hearted “comic relief” is seemingly voiced through love. In an elaborate series of puns upon Ps and Qs – in the sense of etiquette and decorum – set against the deadly earnest symbolic logic employing the same variables at *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 5.242 and 6.1201, the tongue-in-cheek nature of the passage is established. While the humour is evident, the demonstrably accurate parody of the subject matter calls for further scrutiny of the interrelation. Indeed, the references to the “[h]ypothetical case” “[o]n the right” and the “[p]aranthetical chase” “[o]n the left” with the “horseshoe there in the middle” all “in these

parentheses” paint an accurate representation of Wittgenstein's demonstration of logical tautologies, including the implication operator and encapsulating brackets.

Although the first stanza of this song is easily categorized as a Wittgensteinian frame for the poem, the second is not. This portion begins by casting the singers as Wittgenstein's logical variables: “The operation that produces 'q' from 'p' also produces 'r' from 'q', and so on. There is only one way of expressing this: 'p', 'q', 'r', etc. have to be variables that give expression in a general way to certain formal relations” (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 5.242). This stance is derived from *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 3.1432, wherein a complex sign denoting the formal relations of its constituents does not express its sub- and relational components discretely, but is itself expressed by the implicit relationship of the constituents therein. The verse, therefore, posits pRq as a complex sign made possible by the proposed “lifetime of love” between “me” and “you”. In doing so, this passage contextualizes a Wittgensteinian motif on the equality of variables with their relations within love; an emotional sensation involving the elevation of the object, as Petra Bianchi touches upon in her analysis of this song (Bianchi 9). Obviously, it is incongruous to express the abstract and romantic notion, “a lifetime of love,” within such a logical formation. The refutation in the third verse is equally complex. The first six lines could be interpreted as dispelling the need (“go jump in the lake”) for feigned romantic sentiments (“R is a meaningless concept”) which are intended only to increase the “odds” of success in the “chase” of a “girl hard to make”. This is seemingly confirmed by the demand for logical perspicuity: “no more sticky phrases,” precisely the line taken by Wittgenstein: “[e]verything that can be put into words can be put clearly” (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 4.116).

In other words, the argument for romance in the second verse, however feigned, brings

Wittgenstein's text into play and insists that “We just mind our little P's / And Q's,” while employing vagaries and abstract language: “a lifetime of love” and “anything lovely you'd care to infer to”. Meanwhile the rebuttal, which dismisses the Wittgenstein reference by stating “to hell with all your P's / And Q's” actually aligns with Wittgenstein, dismissing the abstract notions (“I prefer the hard and tangible things I can measure”) in pursuit of linguistic clarity (“no more sticky phrases”) and hedonistic pleasure (“there are birds, there are bees”). The former, therefore, constructs an environment of affect which supports a logical model, while the latter destroys the logical model while taking its conclusions; a self-effacing path, an ambivalent stance. The effect of this partisan structure of allegiance, hostile hospitality and hospitable hostility is to reveal, through the dual tautology of each speaker meaning the same, yet speaking the opposite of their counterpart, the non-committal dualistic structure itself. Through this double-act of contradictions, paired to form tautologies and woven to reveal a relational structure, a *Tractarian* mirror of the problematic logical proscriptions on ethical absolutism seems to emerge. This is a reading that can only hold, however, while a single Wittgensteinian perspective is considered.

Infected Romanticism Rewritten (The New Wittgenstein)

In specifying the realms of coherent language, the *Tractatus* contributes to both normative and meta-ethics, with Wittgenstein himself writing that “the point of the book is ethical” (“Letters to Ludwig Ficker” 94-95). In the concrete specificity of its dogmatic injunctions, the *Tractatus* gives a substantive account of correct behaviour for philosophical discourse, derived from a logical stance. Conversely, the “transcendental” (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 6.13) nature of logic reveals that “[a]ll propositions are of equal value” (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 6.4) and that any non-accidentality “must lie outside the world” (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 6.41). It, therefore,

becomes clear that “ethics cannot be put into words,” (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 6.421) for “it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics” (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 6.42). Herein, Russell's critique of *Tractarian* logical formation also applies to Wittgenstein's ethical pronouncements: “after all, Mr. Wittgenstein manages to say a good deal about what cannot be said” (Russell xxiii).

One of Wittgenstein's *Tractarian* conclusions regarding the ethical and the ineffable is that the mystical sensation derived from this clear-cut bounding is to “[feel] the world as a limited whole” (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 6.45); a romantically awe-struck stance towards the sublimity of creation: “[i]t is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists” (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 6.44). One of the most obvious comparisons with such a stance is to the Hegelian infinite as exemplified in the morality of the “ought”. In this reading the “all that is the case” world is actually a false infinite, whereas in accepting this infinite as a limited whole, an externality is acknowledged that lies beyond the bounds of expression: the true infinite. As Hegel puts it: “the very fact that something is determined as a limitation implies that the limitation is already transcended”. Indeed, Hegel then goes on to speak of “the feeling of the *self*, which is the totality that transcends this determinateness” (134-135). This interplay is also a theme that runs through the work of the Romantics, particularly Coleridge, who wrote in *Biographia Literaria* that imagination is “a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” (304). Surprisingly, the sentiments of Romanticism – embracing the sublime, transcendence, experience, individualism and affect – appear at the conclusion of a philosophical work on logic. In many ways, whereof the *Tractatus* speaks of mysticism, thereof it speaks of Romanticism.

Pynchon has an equally complex relationship to Romanticism, best summarized by Judith

Chambers' compelling argument that “*Vineland* has underscored the fact that a project of repair and recovery will never be as seductive as the romantic brutality which did this damage” (Chambers 21). David Cowart has noted that Romanticism in *V.* is articulated as a genre playing on a “single melody, banal and exasperating [...]: 'the act of love and the act of death are one'” (Cowart 77; *V.* 410). It seems that in Pynchon, Romanticism has become infected with its own one-way movement towards death. Furthermore, in a Ford Foundation grant application the early Pynchon “identifies himself as one who has dabbled for short spans of time with a contemporary Romantic view, only to swing back [...] to a “classical” outlook” (Weisenburger 696) and also as “fully disaffected with the Byronic romanticism of the Beats” (Weisenburger 697). In short, in decrying the means by which a “concrete dedication to abstract conditions results in unpleasant things like wars” (Weisenburger 695), Pynchon actually aligns himself with the Byron of 1820 and sees “Romanticism and Classicism – locked in a great war” (Weisenburger 697). This fluctuation towards and away from the Romantic has spanned Pynchon's entire career. On the one hand, the Romantic ideal has the power to draw us into our own individualized experience of beauty, on the other, it has the capacity to move people towards aggressive nationalism; the conflict of the self and society.

This duality of Romanticism is most aptly demonstrated through *V.*'s *The Whole Sick Crew*. Indeed, *The Whole Sick Crew* is disempowered and infected by the culture against which it subculturally defines itself. As Rooney Winsome phrases it:

“Listen friends,” Winsome said, “there is a word for all our crew and it is sick [...]

“Fergus Mixolydian the Irish Armenian Jew takes money from a Foundation named after a man who spent millions trying to prove thirteen rabbis rule the world. Fergus sees nothing wrong

there.

Esther Harvitz pays to get the body she was born with altered and then falls deeply in love with the man who mutilated her. Esther sees nothing wrong either.

“[...] Anybody who continues to live in a subculture so demonstrably sick has no right to call himself well.” (V. 360-361)

Rachel Owlglass, however, claims that she has moved beyond the logic of the Crew because: “[t]he Crew lost all glamour for me, I grew up” (V. 358). Yet, the growing-up still had to be grown, even if the formative process was then deemed worthy of obliteration and it is here that Pynchon's engagement with Wittgenstein and ethical relativism can resume. In the mid 1980s to 1990s, a new wave of criticism – dubbed the “New Wittgenstein” – emerged which did not sit well with the orthodoxy. As Kahane et al. point out, the orthodox interpretation of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* leads to an internal paradox, namely that its own propositions must be nonsensical, “given that they are trying to say what cannot be said” (Kahane et al. 5). This school interprets the statements on “silence” and “nonsense” at the poles of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* as a “frame” which instructs the reader to disregard all that lies within, to jettison the climbed ladders. The New Wittgenstein can, therefore, be construed as a meta-structural mapping that sees an overall, functional purpose to the text (to stop people philosophizing), but that also explicitly declares a logical inconsistency within itself. This technique, termed “autodestruction” by Hanjo Berressem (244) and “overwriting” by Katalin Orbán (116), also features in the linguistics and politics of all Pynchon's novels. Neither an excised “Fresca” from *The Fire Sermon*, nor a politicizing McClintic Sphere from the *V. Typescript*, this mode of “destruction” is self-contained and incomplete.

A disrupting affiliation to this system of erasure, but not obliteration, can be seen even within Pynchon's linguistic structures. For instance, the opening scenes of *The Crying of Lot 49*:

Through the rest of the afternoon, through her trip to the market in downtown Kinneret-Among-The-Pines to buy ricotta and listen to the Muzak (today she came through the bead-curtained entrance around bar 4 of the Fort Wayne Settecento Ensemble's variorum recording of the Vivaldi Kazoo Concerto, Boyd Beaver, soloist); then through the sunned gathering of her marjoram and sweet basil from the herb garden, reading of book reviews in the latest Scientific American, into the layering of a lasagna, garlicking of a bread, tearing up of romaine leaves, eventually, oven on, into the mixing of the twilight's whiskey sours against the arrival of her husband, Wendell ("Mucho") Maas from work, she wondered, wondered, shuffling back through a fat deckful of days which seemed (wouldn't she be first to admit it?) more or less identical, or all pointing the same way subtly like a conjurer's deck, any odd one readily clear to a trained eye. (*The Crying of Lot 49* 6)

This passage serves as an excellent *mise-en-abîme* for much of Pynchon's fiction, featuring many of his trademark motifs and a syntax that is incredibly difficult to parse. Notably, interspersed in this passage are no fewer than four instances of “through,” two appearances of “into” before a turnaround: “against” and “back”.

This “through [...] through [...] through [...] then through [...] into [...] into [...] against [...] back through” sequence reveals why the sentence is so difficult to read. The first five prepositions carry connotations of progress. As with much of Oedipa's investigative unravelling, it seems she might be

getting somewhere; she “knows a few things” (*The Crying of Lot 49* 75). With each additional “through” and “into,” the pace of the sentence gathers. The stalling “against” acts as a warning of the oppositional tension introduced when the central active verb (“wondered”) reverses the flow of the sentence by omitting the anticipated conjunction (“whether” or “if”) that would establish an interrogative content clause. Instead, Pynchon forces a back reference to the antecedent sentence: “[s]he tried to think back to whether anything unusual had happened around then”. The final temporal locative adverb in this sentence refers back further to “a year ago” which must be construed relatively from the book's first, nondescript, clause: “[o]ne summer afternoon” (*The Crying of Lot 49* 5). Subsequently there is only a reversal, a “shuffling back through” the days for the exception. Indeed, this system recurs throughout the entire novel which contains, despite the initial bulge of forward throughness, a total of 75 occurrences of “through” compared to 131 instances of “back”.

The curious structural parallel between Pynchon's writing and the New Wittgensteinian frame of overwriting has, in both works, political and ethical ramifications, most clearly demonstrated in Pynchon's latest novel, *Inherent Vice*. The novel's epigraph exhibits a chronology of overwriting, echoing the slogans of May '68: “Under the paving stones, the beach!” and as with *The Crying of Lot 49*, the linguistic trend of directional reversal is emphasized in the very first sentence, which shifts from “along” and “up,” to “back” and “the way she always used to” (*Inherent Vice* 1). However, the clearest signal that Pynchon is deploying the same techniques of erasure lies in the V.-like, Lot 49-esque entity, The Golden Fang: it is “what they call many things to many folks” (*Inherent Vice* 159).

The Golden Fang begins life in the text as a mysterious anti-communist operations schooner which survived the Halifax Harbour explosion, originally christened *Preserved* (*Inherent Vice* 92, 95).

However, Doc's certainty on this is soon erased as he learns that, in the experience of Jason Velveeta, the Golden Fang is actually an “Indochinese heroin cartel” (*Inherent Vice* 159). Lingering on this for only the shortest of moments, Doc encounters a building bearing an architectural rendition of a golden fang and purportedly occupied by a “syndicate” of which most members “happen to be dentists” (*Inherent Vice* 168-169). Indeed, Tito Staverou also confirms the Greek translation of Chryskylodon – supposedly a private mental healthcare facility – as “a gold tooth” (*Inherent Vice* 185). The inclination when reading this is to deduce that, owing to the chronology, the previous source must have been mistaken; the voice of Sauncho Smilax is superseded by Velveeta, Harlington, Staverou or Blatnoyd. However, as Pynchon puts it in *Inherent Vice*: “[q]uestions arose. Like, what in the fuck was going on here, basically. [...] And would this be multiple choice?” (*Inherent Vice* 340) The answer is perhaps multiple, but it is not a choice, as also voiced in the introduction to *Slow Learner*: “not a case of either-or, but an expansion of possibilities” (*Slow Learner* 7).

While these developments overwrite one another in terms of narrative chronology, Pynchon complicates the situation by ensuring that each entity behind the name “Golden Fang” retains its own independent existence. For example, one of the final scenes within the novel focuses upon the first “definition” of the term: the schooner (*Inherent Vice* 357-359). Hence, the voices who speak of the Golden Fang speak over one another in only one sense. In another, they speak together in a discordant symphony of simultaneous polyphony. As Sauncho realizes, such polyphony provides a deeper truth than a historical narrative of unity: “but suppose we hadn't come out. There'd be only the government story” (*Inherent Vice* 359). In the logic of overwriting, diversity and disempowerment are addressed through the notion of communal truth.

Abstraction, Ideals and Forms: Pynchon and the Private Language Argument

To see Pynchon's historical overwriting as an ethical statement in the context of his relation with Wittgenstein, it is finally necessary to link the priority on alterity that emerges when historical narratives co-exist, rather than compete, to the *Philosophical Investigations*. As Smith notes, to posit a devolution of history as a counterpoint to authoritarian structures is hardly novel (Smith 2). However, when seen in light of Wittgenstein's Private Language Argument, Pynchon's relativism becomes an active ethical act.

Unquestionably, one of the most remarkable portions of Wittgenstein's later work is the multi-stranded reasoning commonly referred to as the Private Language Argument(s). In Hacker's reading the arguments run from §243-315 and yet they remain elusive, not only because they are counter-intuitive, but also because their ramifications are obscure. The traditional conception of experience, permeating philosophy through Descartes, Hume and the phenomenologists, assumes epistemic privacy; only the subject can grasp his or her sensations entirely and others can only "understand" through analogy. There is the sensation itself, there is the expression of this private experience into approximate language and there is the reception of this by another who then translates it into terms compatible with his or her own experience. This presupposes the concept of what is termed Private Language. The sense of this phrase is neither to designate a language which coincidentally has only one speaker, nor one that an individual has made up for themselves ("idiolalia" as Pynchon terms it in *Vineland* and *Gravity's Rainbow* (*Vineland* 263; *Gravity's Rainbow* 727)). It is, instead, used in the sense of a language which can only ever have one speaker because the rules, grammar and concepts are inherently inexplicable to another and are thus absolutely personal. The traditional model of our sense-experience as a domain of privileged access is at heart reliant upon such a language. It is this model which Wittgenstein seeks to undermine in *Philosophical Investigations*.

Crucially, it must be noted that the assault on Private Language bears not only upon the obvious target of Cartesianism, but also upon Platonism, for it counters the assertion that public language can be assigned to a private sensation, or object, in an act of private ostensive definition. Such a structure would only be valid if a grammatical context for usage could be constructed from the mental correlative of a real-world sample. Wittgenstein's earliest reference to such a problem is in the 1936 *Language of Sense Data* lectures, in which he states that private sensations cannot be the subject of deixis because it is impossible to preserve a sensation for future comparison: "I can't say that I am

preserving here the impression of red” (42). Neither transitory, nor persistent, thoughts or sensations can be used as samples (Hacker 101-110). This is the basis for Wittgenstein's claims in *Philosophical Investigations* that, as there can be no consideration of a mental “sample” in the case of public grammar, we must “always get rid of the idea of the private object” (*Philosophical Investigations* 177) because “if we construe the grammar of the expression of sensation on the model of 'object and designation' the object drops out of consideration as irrelevant” (*Philosophical Investigations* §293, 85).

Platonic forms and ideals can be deemed such non-considerable objects. In Crispin Wright's pointed words, "Platonism is, precisely, the view that the correctness of a rule-informed judgement is a matter quite independent of any opinion of ours, whether the states of affairs which confer correctness are thought of as man-made [...] or truly platonic and constituted in heaven" (Wright 257). Much of Wittgenstein's stance on this conception of Platonism is drawn from his remarks on mathematics within the 1937 *Proto-Investigations* and its derivative works. From these it can be seen that Wittgenstein believed that abstract forms, ideals and other non-spatio-temporal constructs cannot be construed as other than private objects which thus can play no part in any language game. This is exemplified in mathematical propositions which must not be seen as descriptions of a formula that explains signs, but as instruments, rules for framing descriptions (G. Baker and Hacker 10). The traditional Platonist account of mathematics is of an *a priori* formation that is independent from experience; a law to be mentally deduced. Indeed, Pynchon ridicules this view in *Vineland* when the mathematician, Weed Atman, is told that he should "[d]iscover a theorem". His questioner, Rex Snuvvle, goes on to expound that he "thought they sat around, like planets, and... well, every now and then somebody just, you know... discovered one." Weed's reply is short: "I don't think so" (*Vineland* 233). This tension of understanding, which forms the basis of Kant's proposal of synthetic *a priori* knowledge, is well put by Silvio Pinto:

If we suppose that mathematical propositions are normative laws [...] then it seems to follow that the epistemic justification for upholding them cannot be empirical. Nevertheless, the fact that propositions of mathematics constitute an indispensable part of our scientific theories seems to imply that our knowledge claims concerning these propositions must be justified [...] on the basis of experience. (Pinto 269)

Such a view was also voiced in *Gravity's Rainbow*, where critiques of Platonism and Cartesian duality far outweigh the silences which “NTA cannot fill, cannot liquidate” (*Gravity's Rainbow* 340-341) and align Pynchon with Wittgenstein's stance against Private Language. Platonically, Pynchon's Rocket is entrenched in the resurrectional mythology of the ideal: the “00001,” brought to the “holy place” (*Gravity's Rainbow* 724-725) through the “festival” of the “Rocket-raising” (*Gravity's Rainbow* 361), where its *Tractarian* mysticism can be made manifest as, “it's only the peak that we are allowed to see, the break up through the surface, out of the other silent world” (*Gravity's Rainbow* 726). In fact, the Schwarzgerät's 00000 carrier and its subsequent (yet textually precedent) 00001 are attempts to realize such a Platonic “Perfect Rocket” (*Gravity's Rainbow* 426). Even Blicero's desire to be “taken in love,” to “leave this cycle of infection and death” is infused with idealism (*Gravity's Rainbow* 724).

Meanwhile, notions of Cartesian duality and privacy are dispelled in only the second episode of *Gravity's Rainbow*, where Pirate Prentice is revealed as possessing a “strange talent for—well, for getting inside the fantasies of others: being able, actually, to take over the burden of managing them” (*Gravity's Rainbow* 12). Indeed, as the mathematical persona of Descartes is linked to the development of the Rocket through the “Cartesian x and y of the laboratory” (*Gravity's Rainbow* 400), Pynchon offers a further condemnation of this entire schema through its entanglement with the Pavlovian paedophile, Edward Pointsman (*Gravity's Rainbow* 50-51), whose sadistic animal experiments position “the cortex of Dog Vanya's brain” as the “interface” between “[i]nside and outside” (*Gravity's Rainbow* 78-79). In opposition, Kevin Spectro, a “neurologist” but only “casual Pavlovian” (*Gravity's Rainbow* 47) “did not differentiate as much [...] between Outside and Inside” (*Gravity's Rainbow* 141). At last, through his contra-Pointsman perspective, Spectro is led to the conclusion of Wittgenstein's Private Language Argument: “[w]hen you've looked at how it really is,' he asked once, 'how can we, any of us, be separate?’” (*Gravity's Rainbow* 142)

In this final consideration I contend that, at a specifically delineated point of contact between Pynchon and Wittgenstein, Pynchon's ethical and political relativism works on a twofold mechanism alongside Wittgenstein's formulations on mathematics, Private Language and linguistic normativity. The arc of relativism throughout Wittgenstein's writing begins with the proscription of ethical absolutes in the *Tractatus*. In the transition that leads to *Philosophical Investigations*, there is a shift in Wittgenstein's philosophy towards meaning through different contexts, or language games; a community defines its language (*Philosophical Investigations* 161). Taking the intersection of these stances shows that they are not incompatible in terms of ethics; there may, indeed, be no logical basis for purely altruistic ethics, but ethics is instead defined by a community. While community relativism is vital for propositions which the *Tractatus* declares ineffable (ethics, aesthetics, metaphysics), an

absolutism of personal experience and sensation is explicitly outlawed by the overriding Private Language Argument. It is in this synthetic meta-reading of Wittgenstein, and in this alone, that we find Pynchon shares a relation to ethical relativism.

This shared relation allows Pynchon to relativize the Holocaust as an ethical act, for to accept Wiesel's claim that the experience was beyond understanding renders the terms "Holocaust," "Shoah," and "genocide" empty and robs them of any cultural or historical import. In Wittgensteinian terms, the designated private object would drop out of consideration. At the same time, Pynchon can advance multiple strands of history without succumbing to an all encompassing nihilistic relativism, for locked in the great struggle between Classicism and Romanticism is a balancing act of negation. This balancing aims to prevent the Platonically romantic concepts of "Weltpolitik and Lebensraum" (J. S. Baker 325), racial ideals, manifest destiny and nationalism – all of which are embraced by both the Nazis and the "Roosevelt, Kennedy, Nixon, Hoover, Mafia, CIA, Reagan, Kissinger" (*Vineland* 372) octet – becoming the sole dominant discourse, without permanently giving way to an overriding rationality. It is an ethics and politics defined by a community from a bottom-up approach. This relativism is mitigated by Pynchon's allegiance to the disempowered; a community ethics redressing the imbalance of the right to speak.

Pynchon's ambivalence and conflicted representation in *V.* towards the early Wittgenstein can be explained by a limited resonance between the two. The *Tractatus'* proscription on logical derivation of ethical propositions can be seen as correct: to hell with your Ps and Qs. Conversely, the implicit acceptance of Private Language within the *Tractatus* – which is adeptly covered by Sascha Pöhlmann in a forthcoming *Pynchon Notes* article – for reasons of Holocaust relativity, cannot. At the other end of

the spectrum, the *Philosophical Investigations* again provides a partial alignment with Pynchon's stance towards relativism, for while it denies the absolutism of personal experience and admits an ethical relativity of community (*Philosophical Investigations* §293, 85), it does not contain the overwriting structural features of the New Wittgensteinian approach which constitute Pynchon's method for presenting simultaneous historical narratives. Meanwhile, a New Wittgensteinian approach in isolation would give no definitive criteria for ethical identity. In terms of deducing a more solidified rationale for suspecting Pynchon's politics and ethics of sitting “a step leftward of registering to vote as a Democrat” (*Vineland* 290), it is now possible to see the quantity of disempowered voices in Pynchon's fiction as a community mitigation against an unbounded relativism. It is now possible to trace – from Ford Foundation grant through to more recent works – the strand in Pynchon's historical trajectory which decries the commitment to abstracts in the banishment of Platonism. Finally, it is now possible to argue that in the demolition of Cartesian privacy, far from belittling the experience of victims – be they survivors of Nazism or von Trotha – Pynchon's work salvages some meaning from otherwise hollow words, in contravention to Adorno's sentiments on autonomous art. As for theoretical methodology, in the end the “choice” had to be multiple. Perhaps Wittgenstein puts it best:

“When someone sets up the law of the excluded middle, he is as it were putting two pictures before us to choose from, and saying that one must correspond to the fact. But what if it is questionable whether the pictures can be applied here?” (*Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* 268)

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