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Thomas Pynchon ranks among the most critically acclaimed American authors of the past fifty years; certainly so when viewed in terms of academic scholarship. He has two academic journals devoted solely to his work and influence, over twenty monographs exploring his writing and, since 1978, there have been [23 doctorates awarded in the United Kingdom alone](#) on, or in major part concerning, his fiction. This trend shows no sign of stopping; with apologies to the well-known formulation of **James Joyce**, almost a century ago, it seems as though Thomas Pynchon will continue to keep the professors busy.

The reasons for this critical proliferation are not hard to fathom. Pynchon is a man of mystery, [refusing to be photographed or interviewed](#), who has published some of the finest works of post-war literature, particularly *V.*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Mason & Dixon*. His novels have most frequently been type-cast as exemplary of the postmodern – saturated as they are with paranoia, indeterminacy and failed quest-narratives – but this seriously underplays the scale of Pynchon's writing. Consider that Pynchon is also a writer of enormous historical scope. *V.* spans the defining moments of crisis in the twentieth century, *Gravity's Rainbow* re-casts the sixties in terms of World War II and the history of Calvinism (including a flashback to a Mauritian Dodo hunt) while *Mason & Dixon* explores the interrelation of its eponymous protagonists with the Age of Reason and slavery in America. If this weren't enough, his novels are interdisciplinary, incorporating metaphors from science and technology, cartography, popular culture, cartoons, aural puns, mathematical in-jokes, outrageous character names (and sexual practices) and sublime prose poetry.

More important than any of these preceding aspects, though, is the fact that Pynchon is a politically engaged, ethical writer. *Gravity's Rainbow*

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the novel upon which I will focus today, is not just a dense, postmodern sprawl, but instead makes one of its central observations on the fact that the evil of mankind, parallel to nature, “does not

know extinction; all it knows is transformation”, a spatio-temporal transposition to a new setting, persisting Beyond the Zero of any Pavlovian deconditioning, and always collecting around centres of power, embodied by the novel’s final, America-bound, transatlantic V-2/ICBM. Through this impossible moment, Pynchon highlights that behind twentieth-century America’s technological and economic supremacy lies the dark negotiations of [Operation Paperclip](#) and a re-embodiment of the right-wing politics supposedly vanquished in the Second World War. How many of us notice, inscribed upon our antibiotics, the second label, permanently hidden beneath the surface-level, reading “[sulfonamide](#)” and “[I.G. Farben](#)”? How many of us see, when we watch satellite television, the German technician crying: “[Vergeltungswaffe](#)”?

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This mammoth novel, in common with *Mason & Dixon*, *Against the Day*, *V.*, *Vineland* and *The Crying of Lot 49*, plots the webs of global conspiracy and power that lurk behind everyday appearance; it unmasks, it shows the deception of perception. Thus, uniting both the California and the epic cycles of Pynchon's work has been a tacit critical acceptance that Pynchon sits firmly in the idealist tradition, particularly those forms of subjective idealism that query the accessibility of the beyond.

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As David Cowart puts it: Pynchon's writing is preoccupied with “challenging and subverting materialist complacency”.

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However, since 2008, Pynchon criticism has belatedly found a route into the thinkers of the Frankfurt School through the work of Sam Thomas whose *Pynchon and the Political* plots the instances of micro-utopia in Pynchon's fiction through an Adornian methodology, those small moments of isolated hope, the one-time, unrepeatable but marginalised instances of immanent utopia. My own subsequent investigations into this route have yielded some strange inconsistencies with the history of idealism that has been presented. Does Pynchon's stance really transform objects

in this way? Is his really subjective idealism or is it possible to enact a revisionist account, even at the fortieth anniversary of *Gravity's Rainbow*, that subverts, or at least tones down this idealist rhetoric? It is to this task that I address this paper through a unique reading of Pynchon alongside Theodor W. Adorno, for the objects that are really transformed here are not private, in Wittgenstein's sense, they do not “drop out of consideration”, they are rather the public objects of Pynchon's politics.

Before proceeding, then, I want to outline some basic aspects of terminology, the very process of which will unavoidably do violence to Adorno's thought, but necessarily so in order to undertake any theoretical consideration. As Pynchon puts it in *Gravity's Rainbow*: “by the time you get any summary, the whole thing'll have changed. We could shorten them for you as much as you like, but you'd be losing so much resolution, it wouldn't be worth it” (540-541).

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Adorno's conception of the purpose, or task, of philosophy, then, is most clearly and succinctly outlined in the piece, “The Actuality of Philosophy”, his 1931 inaugural lecture at the University of Frankfurt. In this lecture, Adorno called for a conflation, but at the same time, separation of philosophy and science. Critiquing both phenomenology for its ontological fixation, resulting in a reason that attempts to coerce nature into its own structures (23) and logical positivism under which “philosophy becomes solely an occasion for ordering and controlling the separate sciences,” Adorno suggests that the question faced by philosophy is whether “there exists an adequacy between the philosophic questions and the possibility of their being answered at all” (29). Adorno believes that philosophy has been asking the wrong questions.

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The questions that should be asked and the way they could be answered came instead from a concept put forward by Walter Benjamin in the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” to his *Trauerspiel* study, the constellation: “[I]deas are not represented in themselves, but solely and exclusively in an arrangement of concrete elements in the concept: as the configuration of these elements [...] Ideas

are to objects as constellations are to stars” (The Origin of German Tragic Drama 34). Adorno concludes that the proper activity for philosophy is a form of configurational permutation, stating that “philosophy has to bring its elements, which it receives from the sciences, into changing constellations [...] into changing trial combinations, until they fall into a figure which can be read as an answer” (“The Actuality of Philosophy” 32).

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With a justification for a theoretical approach put aside, Adorno reveals what is meant by the term negative dialectics. Negative dialectics, to state it precisely but in a way that requires further explication, is the primacy of the object. To explore this, it is necessary to trace Adorno's argument. As a subject thinks, he or she conceives of an equality between the concept in the subject's mind, and the reality which is subsumed under that concept: “To think is to identify”, or from Hegel: “Judgment joins subject and object in a connection of identity” (The Science of Logic sec 21.78). However, for Adorno, the inherent imperfection of the concept means that reality is always more than the concept can hold: “objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder” (ND 5). This remainder is the part of reality that makes it non-identical with a mental concept. Adorno sees, therefore, that in the usual mode of thinking, the subject is given priority as those aspects of reality that don't fit with the subject's concept “will be reduced to the merely logical form of contradiction” (ND 5). To give the object primacy is to respect the unique, rather than to dominate through identity thinking or exclude through contradiction.

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To assess the mainstream against which this paper sets itself, and to return to Pynchon, consider that, alongside Cowart, Douglas Fowler writes extensively, albeit unconvincingly, on the “clash between this world and [...] The Other Kingdom” (10), asserting that “more than any other single effect, supernatural terror is what Pynchon works to convey” (13). Gravity's Rainbow itself, as with much of Pynchon's fiction, is saturated with paranormal occurrences, from its multiple séances to The White Visitation and passages on the “Region of Uncertainty” at the centre of

“Subimipolexity” (700). While one initial retort might be to challenge this on the basis that the perception and cognition of idealism differ from spiritual and supernatural structures, there has been much commentary to undermine such a response. Indeed, this is most marked in the writings of Lenin who refers to philosophical idealism as a “road to clerical obscurantism” (14), a view furthered by Maurice Cornforth's declaration that “[a]t bottom, idealism is religion, theology” (20).

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However, three core aspects of this initial foil against Pynchon's materialism can be parried at the outset. The first is that the appearance of paranormal belief systems is consistent with the generic mediation of the novel's setting; as Brian McHale has recently observed, Pynchon's novels from 1973 onwards seem to appropriate the generic of the era in which they are set and also, therefore, the thematic content, a strategy he terms “mediated historiography” (25): “If *Against the Day* is a library of early-twentieth-century entertainment fiction, then *Gravity's Rainbow* is a media library of the 1940s” (21). The appearance of séances in conjunction with a detective/mystery setup (combining two Pynchonian strands) would be consistent, then, with the films of the era such as *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1939), *Pillow of Death* (1945) and *The Phantom Thief* (1946), which all feature mediated communication with the dead, to name but three examples (Backer 56–57, 164–165, 257–259). As with the character Felipe in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon could be merely “using a bit of movie language” (GR 612).

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The second basic refutation of an idealist Pynchon hinges on the accessibility of Pynchon's beyond. For a transcendental idealism to hold, the thing-in-itself must be inaccessible and unknowable except through appearance. This door swings both ways in *Gravity's Rainbow* for the very purpose of a séance is to experience the beyond, but it is generally through a medium that shapes cognition of the other side into acceptable forms, as with the subjective aspects of Kant's idealism. This is not always the case though, for as Cowart highlights, several of Slothrop's dreams “feature contact or near contact with the dead (*The Art of Allusion* 50). For Cowart, the status of the

oneiric as a knowledge construct is dubious as it is “linked to the ontological and epistemological importance of movies in the novel” (The Art of Allusion 51) and leads to the conclusion of a gnostic Pynchon, as with Eddins (The Art of Allusion 61). However, dreams and séances are not the only encounters with the dead. For many, in Pynchon's depiction of the concentration camp Dora, death came as the liberating equivalent of the American Army, in the realm of the soul and they are now on the “spiritual rampage”. To fend off these ghouls it is suggested that one can “[u]se the natural balance of your mind against them” (296). In this instance it appears that the mechanisms of perceptual concepts that permit understanding can be used to isolate the invading thing-in-itself and banish the phenomenon to the realm of the noumenon. Nevertheless, it seems that the spiritual must have, in the first instance, crossed the perceptual divide and entered the realm of the material even when “certain messages don't always 'make sense' back here” (GR 624).

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The third perspective that assaults a Pynchon-against-materialism comes from Jeff Baker whose excellent work on Pynchon's politics traces the pragmatist association of the idealist tradition with right-wing Nazi ideology in Dewey, Kedward and Westbrook (327). Obviously, this critique is pertinent in an Adornian context, for other sinister components of the idealist tradition seem also to filter back into the text; consider, for instance, Slothrop's horrific dream in *Gravity's Rainbow* wherein he has found “a very old dictionary” and, as it falls open to the page containing the entry “JAMF”, the name of his, perhaps non-existent, experimental persecutor, he finds that “[t]he definition would read: I” (287). Idealism, in both transcendental and absolute forms, comes under heavy political critique in *Gravity's Rainbow*, but it is always worth remembering the comforting words of Enzian to Katje: “[n]one of it may look real, but some of it is. Really” (659).

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Three suggestions, then, that Pynchon may, for ethico-political reasons, depict, but still condemn an idealist system. But how do these play out within the text itself? Beginning to think about *Gravity's Rainbow* in light of Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* allows a consideration of the issue

of cyclicity in the novel and to examine Blicero's sacrificial launch (in which he places his young lover inside a custom-crafted V2) as a moment that pits the idealist and materialist traditions against one another while also mounting a critique of positivist dialectics itself. To trace this, it is necessary to aggregate the moments of comment upon sacrifice and absolutism that occur in the novel, the foremost of which takes place in the first extended commentary upon the Zone Herero (314-329).

The conversation between Josef Ombindi and Enzian at this point turns upon a guessing game to identify an act that “you ordinarily wouldn't think of as erotic – but it's really the most erotic thing there is”. The first clue offered in this game of twenty questions is that “It's a non-repeatable act” which must necessarily exclude firing a rocket because “there's always another rocket” (319). This clearly ties in with the Herero's plan to launch the second such rocket. However, the second, and final clue – that the answer “embraces all of the Deviations in one single act” – leads to the conclusion that the phenomenon of which they speak “is the act of suicide”.

Blicero's launch of his rocket can be seen, in the light of this unfolding, as the point of attempted synthesis between several strands inherent in the Zone Herero passage, an act subsequently repeated by Enzian's Revolutionaries of the Zero. The first, most obvious, thesis/antithesis pairing fused in this moment is Gottfried's willing complicity (unrepeatable suicide) with a rocket launch (cyclicity). In this respect, the synthesis approaches one-timeness through repetition. Secondly, Pynchon's rocket synthesis fuses the differing factions of the Herero into the unified goal of the prevailing System, perhaps best seen in the 00001. At once, the utopian specificity of the event exhibits identity with the smothering master concept. Finally, and critically most well known, Blicero's and Enzian's launches fuse autonomy with loss of agency. Blicero believes, for instance, that the Rocket is the key to “understand truly his manhood” which is an active undertaking “won, away from the feminine darkness” but is simultaneously a submission; “demanded, in his own case, that he enter the service of the Rocket” (324). For Enzian, asserting his agency in “schemes, expediting, newly invented paperwork”, it is also a loss as his act is a mere secondary repetition, a repetition that must end with the one-timeness of tribal death (318). Finally,

for Gottfried, who sits at the centre of the synthesis, his dialectic encounters two cross-woven axes, for his is the part of the masochist, the one who acts by surrendering his ability to act while, on the y-coordinate, as he is all too aware:

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“This ascent will be betrayed to Gravity. But the Rocket engine, the deep cry of combustion which jars the soul, promises escape. The victim, in bondage to falling, rises on a promise, a prophecy, of Escape...” (758)

These failed attempted syntheses of contradictions, across each element of Adornian Utopia, into single subjects, acts and events are, as Adorno puts it, “not due to faulty subjective thinking” (ND 151). Instead, the idealist “act of synthesis [...] indicates that it shall not be otherwise”, it closes down the possibility of difference, the Utopian, as “[t]he will to identify works in each synthesis” (ND 148). The will, in each of these cases, is to subsume the opposite, to eradicate the contradiction, to make reality conform to reason's domination and thereby escape. As has been seen, though, under this schema repetition drags one-timeness back, the group subsumes the marginal and gravity brings down escape. Blicero's attempted mastery of the world, in order to transcend it, can be seen to work in much the same way as Adorno's framing of idealist dialectics. In Pynchon's fictional world, positivity is continually thwarted and it is, instead, an unfruitful, yet necessary negativity, that must continually undercut that is placed at centre stage.

This reading gains further weight because it helps to account for a different moment of attempted transcendence achieving a different status. Consider that Geli Tripping's magic, with which she bewitches Tchitcherine near the novel's close, does not take two incompatible ends of a loaf and join them, but rather “breaks a piece of the magic bread in half”; moving from the concept to the specific (734). Indeed, it is made clear that the “[y]oung Tchitcherine” views “Marxist dialectics” as “the antidote ” – a determined synthetic, aggressive dance of collision and subsuming annihilation – but that he also appreciates that his allegiance to such a fusion will only be determined at “the point of decision” (701). Reading this passage in light of Tchitcherine's

subsequent turn away from the place Pynchon earlier describes as that

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“[w]here ideas of the opposite have come together, and lost their oppositeness” leads to two conclusions (50). Firstly, Pynchon does not critique materialism solely through a paralysing idealism. Instead, his criticism is, at points, immanently materialist. Secondly, it is possible to see a kinship with Adornian negativity that separates Tchitcherine's and Blicero's respective “redemptions”. Blicero's moment of closing possibilities attempts to cross the final edge, mistakenly believing this moment to be freedom. As Achtfaden's narrative passage in Gravity's Rainbow observes:

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You follow the edge of the storm, with another sense – the flight-sense, located nowhere, filling all your nerves... as long as you stay always right at the edge between fair lowlands and the madness of Donar it does not fail you, whatever it is that flies, this carrying drive toward – is it freedom? (455)

Tchitcherine's “personal doom” is “always to be held at the edges of revelations,” but it seems this is also his personal salvation (566). Transcendence, when viewed in terms of dialectical progress, both idealist and materialist, is not a positive goal in Gravity's Rainbow; one must instead remain forever moving in terms of negative critique, allowing thought to continually unthink itself, process not progress. This persistent negativity explains Roger's notion of persistence in his “ineffectual” counterforce tirade:

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What you get, I'll take. If you go higher in this, I'll come and get you, and take you back down. Wherever you go. Even should you find a spare moment of rest, with an

understanding woman in a quiet room, I'll be at the window. I'll always be just outside. You will never cancel me. (636-637)

Yes, Tchitcherine goes to the edge, his “edge of the evening” where he “has passed his brother by” (735). He does not however, cross-over; he does not wish on the “star between his feet” for escape (759). He remains immanent. Blicero conversely, at his own “edge of the evening” can look only upwards, beyond the event horizon, drawn towards a the positivity from which no light would escape, which he knows goes on and he lets go on, for “the true moment of shadow is the moment in which you see the point of light in the sky. The single point, and the Shadow that has just gathered you in its sweep...” (759) This is not to say that immanence guarantees success. There remains the possibility, in Gravity's Rainbow, for utopian critique to be of no value whatsoever, a determinate negation that overlays only the same: “[a]nother world laid down on the previous one and to all appearances no different” (644). It is here, though, in parallel to Adorno's Negative Dialectics – a work that resonates strongly with Gravity's Rainbow – that Tchitcherine's redemption can best be framed. Amid collapses all round – “[e]ach day the mythical return Enzian dreamed of seems less possible” (519) – across the myriad of contradictions, conceptual aporias and classificatory attempts, it all boiled down to a single pair of words that encapsulate Pynchon's stab at positivity, resolution and self-content dialectics and which help to demonstrate why the Frankfurt School merit recognition in relation to his writing. Tchitcherine remains at his edge in a cyclical eternity. For while it can syntactically be read in reference to the many instances of passing one's brother by, the juxtaposition creates a sense of temporal strangeness, of cross-cutting markers. Indeed, as with the recurrent critique made by Roger Mexico, never to be displaced, he remains there (he remains here)

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“often forever” (735).