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Chapter 4: Pynchon and new materialism

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Materialism, idealism, and Thomas Pynchon

Materialism is the philosophical school of thought that privileges physical matter above all other things, including thought and existence. For the die-hard materialist, all consciousness, experience, and other mental phenomena – as well as apparently supernatural happenings – can be attributed to physical causes. In a “naïve” or “pre-critical” materialism, such matter is thought to be independent of humans. As it was for the early Wittgensteinian incarnation of Captain Blicero (or Lieutenant Weissmann as he was then known) in Thomas Pynchon's *V.* (1963), in materialism the world is all that is the case (278).

Traditionally, materialism could be set against the philosophy of idealism. This model of idealism, albeit caricatured here for the sake of brevity, is one in which human senses do not necessarily have access to the real world.ⁱ Such a stance is introduced because it is impossible for humans to know whether matter exists independently of our senses, since we cannot step outside of our own human perception. Indeed, in its Kantian version, our very humanness distorts the thing-in-itself to conform to the preconditions of our sensory apparatuses.ⁱⁱ For instance, in the “Transcendental Aesthetic” – an early section of his *Critique of Pure Reason* – Kant writes that it is impossible for perception to exist separately from our concepts of space and time. For Kant, this does not mean that objects themselves

have spatial and temporal qualities. It instead means that our consciousnesses structure objects into spatio-temporal terms so that they can be perceived. In such a philosophy we can never know the truth of objects and instead only have access to the phenomena (our perception of the thing) and not the noumena (the thing-in-itself). Idealisms are philosophies of reference or signification since that which is presented to our senses refers to or signifies, but is not, the thing-in-itself (independent physical matter).

The novels of Thomas Pynchon sit uncomfortably between these two strains of philosophical thought. It will be clear to even the most green of Pynchon readers that his novels are scarcely materialist. In *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), for example, the physical and chemical sciences are subjected to extreme scrutiny as emblems of a positivist materialism that leads to the culture of the V-2 rocket; the belief that scientific knowledge of physical processes can only ever lead in the direction of human advancement is thoroughly undone. On the same side of this debate, perhaps the most well-known of all of Pynchon's novels, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), famously asked whether the world was created by its protagonist's mind: "shall I project a world?" (82). Indeed, the overt solipsism of Pynchon's novels is precisely of the idealist school; the world is formed by individuals and does not necessarily exist independently of them. Furthermore, the supernatural or extraordinary occurrences that run through all of Pynchon's novels, up to the Ouija board incident in *Inherent Vice* (2009) or the fact that, in *Bleeding Edge* (2013) "there's no shame in going for a magical explanation" (441), have an idealist quality to them. For David Cowart, Pynchon is the master of "challenging and subverting materialist complacency."ⁱⁱⁱ

On the other hand, though, Pynchon's novels also yield what I have referred to as a "quasi-materialism" and there are three reasons why his work is not well-served under a purely idealist label.^{iv} The first is that the events Pynchon depicts that seem to express idealist leanings, such as the supernatural space of the séance, are usually in fashion for the time-

period that Pynchon is depicting; the details may be incidental and part of a mediated historiography.^v The second reason is that Pynchon's supernatural spaces – “the beyond,” ghost-worlds, and dreams – are not wholly materially inaccessible, as they would be in an idealist setup. It is suggested, for instance, that in order to fend off the ghoulish “spiritual rampage” of the dead in Camp Dora in *Gravity's Rainbow*, one can “[u]se the natural balance of your mind against them” (296), a crossing over between the material space of the brain and the immaterial space of the mind that somehow allows access to the realm of the dead. Finally, Pynchon's work yields environments in which the external reality is controlled not by the senses of the observer but by a malign outside entity. Elsewhere in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the reader is told, for instance, that “[t]he War has been reconfiguring time and space into its own image” and that it is “*their time, their space*” (257, 326, italics in original). And Enzian claims, in a different context, that matter exists independently of individual subjective experience: “[n]one of it may look real, but some of it is. Really” (659).

In recent years philosophical thought has brought a set of loosely interconnected paradigms, dubbed “The New Materialism,” to the fore. The stance is primarily concerned, as I will go on to outline, with the anthropocentrism of traditional philosophies of materialism and idealism. Indeed, if one traces Kant's original thought back, it is clear that idealist suppositions are predicated on human sensory apparatuses, while, conversely, materialisms tend to flounder in the face of arguments about human consciousness and its links to matter. This has led to the development of a new approach to materialist thinking that tries to refresh its account to work around such anthropocentrism.

Yet I will note, before turning to this “New Materialism” and Pynchon's position in relation to it, that materialism has itself already undergone several renewals. Most notably, the new materialism of the later nineteenth century fused a form of idealist logic developed by Hegel – the dialectic – with the new idea that an underlying study of material societal

economics might yield a historical truth: the unfolding of the historical dialectic. With respect to this earlier “new materialism,” Pynchon leaves us in no doubt what he thinks: “Karl Marx, that sly old racist” (317).^{vi}

The New Materialism

The “New Materialism” is one of a cluster of other closely related emergent philosophical theories: immanent naturalism, posthumanism, antihumanism, speculative realism, and object-oriented metaphysics.^{vii} The main thinkers of the “movement” are Quentin Meillassoux, Karen Barad, Manuel DeLanda, Jane Bennett, Diana Coole, Samantha Frost, Sara Ahmed, Elizabeth Grosz, William E. Connolly, and Rosi Braidotti, among many others.^{viii} In William E. Connolly’s definition, there are several features of this new materialism that differentiate it both from idealism and other previous forms of materialism:

1. A “protean monism” – in which it is asserted that minds are entangled with non-living entities, as traditionally conceived – challenges dualistic views of mind and body.
2. Matter is not regarded as dead or non-living but rather as in a relationship to various energies. It is an “energy-matter complex.”
3. Metaphysics, once thought to be dead and gone in philosophy, is back, albeit in a contestable form.
4. Subjectivity is stretched well beyond the bounds of the human, thereby yielding a post-anthropocentric philosophy. In other words, the human subject is seen as a construction but it is not treated as a ground.
5. A speculation on elements that exceed current understanding.
6. A sense of shifting ontological uncertainty, entwined with the epistemological.
7. A planetary approach to thinking about microcosmic matters.^{ix}

New materialist ideas have sprung from a variety of sources, and to some extent also seem to have grown independently. A recent edited collection on new- or neo-materialisms, for instance, interviewed prominent figures working within this space, only to find that, as just one example, Manuel DeLanda had not read the work of another interviewee, Quentin Meillassoux.^x Indeed, it is inaccurate, really, to speak of “the” new materialism. Rather, a range of neo-materialisms, which share various precepts, have arisen over the past decade or so.

Core to this new materialism, insofar as it can be considered homogeneous, is a type of overcoming of binaries that is different to that found in the postmodern phase. A good example of this is furnished by Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin who turn to perhaps the ultimate postmodern theorist, Jean Baudrillard. Dolphijn and van der Tuin astutely point out that, when Baudrillard says of Disneyland that “[i]t is no longer a question of a false representation of reality but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real,” he does not step outside the binary of the representational and the real but rather twists it around.^{xi} In other words, the frequent reversals that we see in these types of postmodern thinking are not such radical breaks with the past. They are still a type of negational dialectic in which one continues to negate within the bounds of accepted dualities. New materialisms, on the other hand, generally work differently, casting aside previous binaries, the most important of which to discard being life as somehow opposed to mere matter.

Another central aspect of the new materialism is that it takes aim at both a pre-Kantian realist model and a post-Kantian idealism. In fact, as Quentin Meillassoux charts it, the past two hundred years of philosophical thought have been erroneously following a mode called “correlationism,” in which humans believe that “we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other.”^{xii} The problem that Meillassoux puts at the heart of this is that, under such a model,

thought is not capable of thinking objects that emerged at an ancestral time in which there was no subject capable of perceiving it (he calls this thought experiment the “arche-fossil”). Yet, empirical science continually manages to produce meaningful statements about such a time. It is in this way that the new materialism is designed to reinstate a way of thinking that acknowledges the limits of our perception while also granting a realism beyond the bounds of the human species.

Pynchon beyond the Human

It is unwise to take theoretical or philosophical precepts and then merely apply them to literary works. There is a reason that fiction expresses itself in its own register, distinct from philosophical thought, even when we are dealing with the “novel of ideas.” Nonetheless, in the remainder of this chapter I will illustrate how Pynchon's novels intersect with the philosophical ideas explored above.

The novels of Thomas Pynchon have long held a post-anthropocentric viewpoint, at least superficially. As early as *Gravity's Rainbow*, for example, a type of “mineral consciousness” is described in which the time-scales of experience for rocks are stretched, in language that is typically cinematic, to “frames per century [... or] per millennium” (612). Such a thinking is a type of new materialist practice that posits a center of consciousness that is distinctly non-human but also non-animal. Yet, at the same time, we might question whether such a view is truly post-anthropocentric. For the “intellectual system” that is ascribed to the rock is *anthropomorphic*: the consciousness is “not too much different from that of plants and animals” (612). In this way, even while subjectivity is here pushed beyond the bounds of humanity, it is done so by analogy to human consciousness. This is not, as Ian Bogost might put it, a true “alien phenomenology” in which the subjectivity of objects is made primal but instead a comparative understanding of non-human subjectivity.^{xiii} It is one

that may admit that there is a “contingent being independent of us” but it remains one that is “of a subjective nature.”^{xiv}

The classic example of such a quasi-post-anthropocentric stance in early Pynchon is, of course, the episode of Byron the Bulb in *Gravity's Rainbow* (647-55). In this well-known section, the light bulb known as Byron appears to be immortal, never burning out, and thus thwarts the Phoebus cartel's attempts to build in a planned obsolescence for the sake of profit. At first glance, it appears that such a narrative might perfectly fit the post-anthropocentric standpoint of a new materialism: a light bulb is imbued with a subjectivity that is constituted through the language of an “energy-matter complex.” After all, the language of the bulb is one of power grids and electricity, which brings in what was thought for a long time to be the original “animating force” of life – its vitalism – thereby reuniting two sides of a previous binary opposition.^{xv}

Yet, the life cycle metaphors that are used within the tale of Byron the Bulb once more transpose traditional conceptions of human and animal mortality into the realm of objects. Bulbs, we are told have lives, and “through no bulb shall the mean operating life be extended,” leading the narrator to remark that, like great prophets, such bulbs will be “either killed outright, or given an accident serious enough to make them stop and think” (655). In the imagination of *Gravity's Rainbow* we certainly see consciousness stretched beyond the bounds of the human estate to which it was previously confined. However, I would also argue that such a stretching is also more of a superposition, in which one way of thinking is laid on top of another. When thinking in terms of biological life cycles, even on metaphorical grounds, it becomes easier for us to “imagine” subjectivities beyond the human. However, it is unclear whether such subjectivities – if that word can even be used in these contexts – exist within objects or whether, if we could perceive them, they would be recognizable as such to us. There is also the further challenge of communication in fiction. What would it look like to

imagine *and describe* a non-human or even non-animal consciousness in fiction that did not bear resemblance to the known subjectivity of human readers? Would such a fiction be possible?

Even if Pynchon's non-human subjectivities are imbued with an anthropomorphism – from Byron through to Skip the speaking ball-lightning in *Against the Day* (2006) (73) – the leaps of his imagination towards speculative alternative realities (an underpinning notion of the new materialisms through the “principle of facticity”^{xvi}) are well known and charted. Indeed, such a concept *seems* to sit well with the mid-range literary history of postmodernism within which Pynchon’s work sits since, as Brian McHale charts the change in focus, the shift from an epistemological to an ontological dominant in postmodern fiction closely tracks the contemporary movement in philosophical thought with which I am concerned in this chapter.^{xvii} This is because in the change from an idealist notion of understanding being shaped by consciousness – an epistemology – the new materialism is more concerned with unstable ontologies; with the plurality of modes of being.

Pynchon has long been preoccupied with such issues of being and alternative ontological possibilities. However, the clearest of Pynchon’s explorations of such other realities lies, as Adam Lifshy puts it, “between Mason and Dixon’s marking of a rationalizing European narrative on one hand and the corresponding suppression of multiple hypothetical indigenous worlds on the other.”^{xviii} When Pynchon writes, then, of the ways in which America served as a “Rubbish-Tip for subjunctive Hopes, for all that *may yet be true*” – even as the cartographic enterprise begins “changing all from subjunctive to declarative, reducing Possibilities to Simplicities” – he is himself mapping the way in which things could be very different, as almost every critical approach to the novel has noted (*MD* 345, italics in original). This ontological uncertainty is a core proposition of both the new materialism and

speculative realism, as both these philosophies hold that there is no reason why things should be as they are and that any other set of possible permutations are as likely.

That said, there are bounds to even this type of “otherwise-thinking” in new materialist and speculative realist models (as there are also in Pynchon's writing, to which I will return later). Core to these efforts is the abolition of all necessary logical rules *except* for the principle of non-contradiction (that a proposition cannot be true and false at the same time) and the principle of facticity (that things can be otherwise). The former – the principle of non-contradiction – must hold even in new materialist thinking since its eradication would undermine the possibilities of the principle of facticity. (That is: if statements could contradict themselves and remain true then the principle of facticity, that things could be otherwise, could contradict itself, meaning that it would not be possible for things to be otherwise, leading to a logical paradox.)

In *Against the Day*, however, Pynchon presents various scenarios that seem to violate even the principle of non-contradiction. Bilocation, for instance, in which characters can appear in two locations simultaneously, as do the character(s) Renfrew and Werfner, appears to be such a phenomenon. Within a new materialist frame bilocation poses the question of whether an individual co-existing in two places at once – exhibiting a “predisposition to the echoic,” as Pynchon puts it – violates the principle of non-contradiction (*AD* 227). The actual answer to this question rests on the relationship of linguistic propositions to the basic laws of physics. Is the contradiction of “Renfrew is here” the phrase “Renfrew is there” or “Renfrew is not here”? Indeed, not all negations in natural language constitute a formal logical negation. Time also has a part to play, as it does in Pynchon’s work. (As James Gourley notes, “bilocation and time travel are more closely linked than one might initially consider”); Inger H. Dalsgaard also links Pynchon’s representations of bilocation to technologies of travel and time distortion.^{xix}) In a linguistic sense bilocation must possess a sense of

concurrency. “Renfrew was here” and “Renfrew is not here” clearly do not contradict each other.

Pynchon, though, leaves no ambiguity that his bilocation violates the basic rules of physics. To give another example from *Against the Day*, the *Stupendica* and the *Emperor Maximillian* “share a common engine room”; the two ships physically occupy exactly the same space, at the same time (519). These alternative physical ontologies are part of what Simon de Bourcier has called Pynchon's “impossible objects,” in which we must consider that the generally understood propositions of logic and physical science may not hold.^{xx}

Pynchon takes the new materialist focus on facticity – the plurality of modes of being – and stretches this to breaking point, going even further than the new materialists in violating the fundamental logical principles on which such stances usually rest.

This, of course, is the prerogative of fiction, as opposed to philosophy. For, while philosophy aims to describe and understand the complexities of the world, fiction is often less mimetic, probing alternative realities for situations unfathomable within the bounds of logic to which reality is wedded. Fiction is free to craft such strangeness – imagination is the form’s prerogative, after all – and readers are free to interpret such oddities as either literal elements of a textual narrative or through “lateral” reading “solutions, sidestepping the crisis by passing into metaphorical identities,” as Pynchon puts it (*AD* 418). One such lateral solution has frequently been to cast Pynchon’s impossible dynamics into a political reading, a move that is thoroughly in accordance with a new materialist philosophy.

New Materialism, Anti-Biologism, and Pynchon's Gender Thinking

While Pynchon’s worlds are certainly strange, we should also consider that our own is somewhat odd. As Karen Barad has pointed out, the field of quantum mechanics – while forming the basis for many hackneyed theoretical literary readings – has implications for how

we think about the materiality of the gendered body; the strange entanglements between material elements question our very understandings of time.^{xxi} For, in her reading, the interactions between bodies and environments are not deterministic in the traditional senses of linear time. Causality runs across strange patterns of spacetime mattering that has implications for social justice in the feminist space. The type of question that might be posed by such thinking is: how, for instance, does a future gender identity map onto a previous bodily materiality, if linear causality has been disrupted?

It may appear similarly strange to some readers to learn that new materialist approaches have often been central to debates in contemporary feminism. Sarah Ahmed, for instance, takes umbrage at the way in which new materialist philosophies often implicitly or explicitly claim that many forms of feminism are anti-biological. That is, Ahmed alleges that new materialists “caricature past feminisms” as focusing so strongly on the social construction of gender and sex that they ignore bodily realities. For Ahmed, this is simply untrue and thinkers such as Sedgwick, Frank, and Grosz conduct “an uneven distribution of the work of critique,” reading feminist writers with insufficient attention and bestowing more time on male than female authors.^{xxii}

On the other side of this debate, Noela Davis disagrees with Ahmed's allegations against the new materialism. For Davis, the figures criticized most explicitly in Ahmed's piece are not accusing past feminisms of neglecting the materiality of the body but rather of engaging with such materiality in a space that is somehow apart from the social. Davis instead argues that, in the work of Karen Barad, “matter is not an object, absent or present, but instead ‘it’ can productively be considered as an active process” and this is what past feminisms are accused of neglecting.^{xxiii} For Davis and Barad, nature and culture do not exist separately (or the bodily space and the separate socially conditioned space) but as natureculture together in an unfolding process, in Donna Haraway's terms.^{xxiv}

Without commenting on the merits of either of these arguments, I suggest that they demonstrate that the abstract philosophical concepts of the new materialism are of real-world relevance for a set of engaged thinkers who wish to transform their theories into practice. The works of Thomas Pynchon, though, are curiously framed with respect to feminist thought of any kind. Certainly, two of his novels have female lead characters: *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Bleeding Edge*. Yet, as Joanna Freer points out, in many of Pynchon's works women are treated as "(semi)-inanimate objects upon which men have a right (or even a duty) of possession, imposition or defilement."^{xxv} In Freer's reading this situation does improve over the course of Pynchon's literary career but only in relative terms to a somewhat low starting bar.^{xxvi}

When it comes to the kind of new materialist approach put forward by Barad, in which bodies and social contexts are intertwined and cannot be treated separately, Pynchon's representations of the male body are certainly far easier to align with this than his depictions of female bodies. For instance, in *Gravity's Rainbow* the particular focus on the Pavlovian conditioning of Tyrone Slothrop is integral to the novel's plot. This is an instance in which Slothrop's masculinity is directly tied to an ongoing process of exposure to environmental stimuli that at once wrests the character's sexuality away from him ("The Penis He Thought Was His Own") and also focuses upon the body's relationship to this de-centering process.

There is rarely a commensurate focus upon the female body and its relationship to socially constructed notions of gender in Pynchon's works. In the same novel, the closest we perhaps get is the query about whether Katje Borgesius's performance as the Domina Nocturna, who enacts the sadistic coprophagous episode with Brigadier Pudding, interrelates traditionally opposed sets of genitalia and sexual function. In this episode, Katje wonders whether her potential constipation is "anything like male impotence," thereby locating her analogical equivalent of Slothrop's penis with the female digestive tract. On the other hand,

her “cunt” is described as a “fearful vortex” – a literal emptiness – from the perspective of Brigadier Pudding and she herself refers to it as “her last mystery” (235).

Even if this infamous scene in Pynchon’s early novel does present a reversal of conventional power and gender stereotypes, with a commensurate focus on the biological and the interrelation of gendered spheres of experience, it is in other ways that *Gravity’s Rainbow* more thoroughly adheres to the question-lines of the new materialism as it informs feminism. For the challenge of the new materialism is to provide a mode of thought that is not merely predicated on an existing negation; feminist new materialisms do not define the female body in opposition to the male, for example, but query the entire premise of binary genders based on sexual difference. As Donna Haraway put it as far back as 1988: “bodies as objects of knowledge are material-semiotic generative nodes. Their *boundaries* materialize in social interaction. Boundaries are drawn by mapping practices; ‘objects’ do not pre-exist as such. Objects are boundary projects” (italics in original).^{xxvii} This is, then, a question of undoing *dualism*, of seeing how the lines of separation that we map in order to delineate objects are part of a social process with material implications for human bodies.

As I have pointed out elsewhere, Pynchon’s novels do more than most to query the dualist framework that pervades Western thought.^{xxviii} In the light of new materialist thinking about feminism, it is also fair to extend such a pronouncement and to say that the primary way in which Pynchon does so is through the body and the breakdown of the traditional division between the insides and outsides of bodily forms. In *V.* the plastic surgeon and maker of beautiful bodies, Schoenmaker, makes the ironic statement “[i]nside, outside [...] you’re being inconsistent,” while in *Gravity’s Rainbow* Pirate Prentice is able to get “inside the fantasies of others” (48; 12). Also in the latter novel Edward Pointsman considers “the cortex of Dog Vanya’s brain” as the bridge between “[i]nside and outside,” while Kevin Spectro, the

more ethical of the pair, “did not differentiate as much [...] between Outside and Inside” (78-9, 141).

In Pynchon's later works, there is a continued breakdown of the divides between the internal and the external (implying a critique of Cartesian dualism, the philosophy of an internal mental state and an external body). For instance, Mason and Dixon are told that their voyage will let them explore “any number of things you may have been wond'ring about both inside and outside” (225), while in *Against the Day* the Vormance expedition is unable to contain the meteorite since “[t]rying to get it to fit inside the ship, we measured, and remeasured, and each time the dimensions kept coming out different – not just slightly so but drastically” (144). In other words, in this latter example, Pynchon's entity is determined not just by its own objective existence but by its interaction with measurement. Its bodily size is a combined result of the specific social situation within which it is gauged and the object's innate properties intra-acting, to use Barad's term denoting strangely interacting and constituting feedback loops, with those situations.

Such an intra-action, or onto-epistemology, is typical of new materialist philosophies. It is an onto-epistemology because, in Deleuze and Guattari's words, “the concept is not given, it is created” or, in Barad's terms, “[w]e do not obtain knowledge by standing outside of the world; we know because ‘we’ are *of the world*” (italics in original).^{xxix} In challenging dualism thus, from the early writing in *V.* right up to *Bleeding Edge*, Pynchon's work exhibits a certain *resistance* to the charting of a straightforward move from a modernist epistemology to a postmodern ontology, as though these were separate spaces. It seems clear, as Katherine Hume has signaled, that, when considering Pynchon's works, “we can no longer think in terms of alternate realities” by the time of *Inherent Vice*.^{xxx} Or, at least, not *just* in terms of alternate realities. There is, in Pynchon's later works, often a more confined approach to strange materialities; they appear not in separate spaces, but integrated into the more singular

world. That said, in *Bleeding Edge*, the DeepArcher network is a good example of a subspace; a virtual world that remains separate from the main reality, even while being nested within it – a space that is other and integrated at the same time, thereby yielding the odd topology of knowledge posited by Barad. DeepArcher is both a space apart but also known by its presence *in* the world.

Instead of the shift charted by McHale from epistemology to ontology, which works within a dualist framework of mind and body, what we can see emerging over the course of Pynchon’s literary career is a form of onto-epistemology, in which knowledge is more successfully gained by those who oppose such binaries. It was Pavlov who, Pynchon claims, was “fascinated by ‘ideas of the opposite,’” yet Pynchon’s Pavlovian pedophile Pointsman is hardly a model to follow (*GR* 48).

In Pynchon’s novels we are given glimpses of spaces that resist the idea of the opposite, including in terms of gender dynamics, but that never wholly break free from a binary system. For instance, consider the gender ambiguity of Cyprian Latewood in *Against the Day* that leads to Yashmeen’s pregnancy, via his mouth: “a complex love/sex-relation that is as ecstatic as it is healing and transforming,” as Heinz Ickstadt has put it (*AD* 881-3).^{xxx}
This setup is one in which, in Michael Jarvis’s words:

Cyprian demonstrates an understanding of the rhetorical, performative valence of sexual identity, a deliberately anti-essentialist reading of his homosexuality which does not reduce sexual preference to mere fad, but rather elevates it above identity and gender into the realm of desire, of love. Because Cyprian performs in and out of the bedroom as a dually-sexed subject, he is, like Tiresias, able to possess an empathic knowledge of self and other, a wisdom and a completeness that makes achieving gnosis feasible.^{xxxii}

My reading of Pynchon’s works within the frame of a feminist new materialism hits the buffers at this point. Cyprian’s pronouns shift from “he” to “she” with corresponding

adjective agreements. However, gender remains a binary in which Cyprian is “dually-sexed.” It is not that the binary is here destroyed but rather that the character fluidly traverses the dualistic structures.

Regardless, then, of whether Pynchon’s novels exhibit instances of an onto-epistemology that remap binaries of inside and outside into new forms (which they do), it does not seem true or fair to state that Pynchon’s works radically extend this thinking into the realm of gender and sex. The breakdown of dualistic thinking in Pynchon’s works, insofar as they intersect with a new materialism, appears limited to certain more traditional, philosophical areas of dualistic thought, rather than to the biologism, or otherwise, of new materialist feminisms.

Reading Pynchon after Theory

The time of high Theory in literary studies may now have passed. There is also current talk, in the prestigious venues of literary studies, of a post-critical movement led by Rita Felski, among others.^{xxxiii} Yet, new philosophies are continually generated and provide fresh ways of understanding the aesthetic, political, and mimetic contexts for literary work. Philosophy, as I have pointed out elsewhere, provides us with a common bridge to a mimetic reality that is shared with fiction, even when the two disciplinary spaces diverge in their approaches.^{xxxiv} As Catherine Belsey writes, “[a]ssumptions about literature involve assumptions about language and about meaning, and these in turn involve assumptions about human society. The independent universe of literature and the autonomy of criticism are illusory.”^{xxxv}

The various strands of the school known as the “new materialism” are of some help to us in coming to grips with the works of Thomas Pynchon. For, in many ways, Pynchon’s works have often been about the limits of the human perspective on the world. His novels have been post-anthropocentric from the consciousness of rocks and lightbulbs through to

automated, flying ducks. His writings have also worked against a reductive dualism in which consciousness is neither separate from bodily matter nor wholly integrated with it. There is certainly scope to say that the onto-epistemology of new materialist schools is present in Pynchon's novels, contesting the chronology asserted by Brian McHale.

Such readings can only go so far, though. Pynchon's non-human consciousnesses are framed through analogy to human psyches, which may be an intrinsic boundary of fiction's ability to represent. Furthermore, the breakdown of dualism that we can detect in Pynchon's novels is rarely framed through recourse to feminist thought about the body, gender, and sex. Indeed, while often transgressive, Pynchon's works remain inside a dualistic framework of gender and sex in which transgression is enacted by negation but within the same paradigm of thought.

- ⁱ See Karl Ameriks, “Introduction: Interpreting German Idealism” in Karl Ameriks (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 1-17, for why this is a crude and reductive definition.
- ⁱⁱ Quentin Meillassoux, Rick Dolphijn, and Iris van der Tuin, “Interview with Quentin Meillassoux” in *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (Open Humanities Press, 2012), p. 72.
- ⁱⁱⁱ David Cowart, *Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), p. 36.
- ^{iv} Martin Paul Eve, *Pynchon and Philosophy: Wittgenstein, Foucault and Adorno* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 138-45.
- ^v Brian McHale, “Genre as History: Genre-Poaching in *Against the Day*,” *Genre*, 42.3-4 (2009), doi.org/10.1215/00166928-42-3-4-5, pp. 5-20.
- ^{vi} For more on this passage, see Joanna Freer, *Thomas Pynchon and American Counterculture* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 110.
- ^{vii} William E. Connolly, “The ‘New Materialism’ and the Fragility of Things,” *Millennium*, 41.3 (2013), p. 399.
- ^{viii} Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. by Ray Brassier (Continuum, 2009); Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke University Press, 2007); Manuel DeLanda, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (Zone Books, 1997); Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (Columbia University Press, 1994); Diana H. Coole and Samantha Frost (eds.), *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Duke University Press, 2010).
- ^{ix} All of these points are paraphrased and summarised from Connolly, “The ‘New Materialism,’” pp. 399-402.
- ^x Manuel DeLanda, Rick Dolphijn, and Iris van der Tuin, “Interview with Manuel DeLanda” in *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (Open Humanities Press, 2012), pp. 46-47.

- ^{xi} Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (Open Humanities Press, 2012), p. 122.
- ^{xii} Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, p. 5.
- ^{xiii} Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012).
- ^{xiv} Meillassoux, Dolphijn, and Tuin, "Interview with Quentin Meillassoux," p. 80.
- ^{xv} For more on vitalism in new materialisms, see Jane Bennett, "A Vitalist Stopover on the Way to a New Materialism" in Diana H. Coole and Samantha Frost (eds.), *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 47-69.
- ^{xvi} A principle that states that the only absolute certainty is that everything that is could also be otherwise.
- ^{xvii} Brian McHale, "Change of Dominant from Modernist to Postmodernist Writing" in Douwe Fokkema and Hans Bertens (eds.), *Approaching Postmodernism Papers Presented at a Workshop on Postmodernism*, Utrecht Publications in General and Comparative Literature, 21 (John Benjamins, 1986), pp. 53-79.
- ^{xviii} Adam Lifshey, *Specters of Conquest: Indigenous Absence in Transatlantic Literatures* (Fordham University Press, 2010), p. 125.
- ^{xix} James Gourley, *Terrorism and Temporality in the Works of Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo* (Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 119; Inger H. Dalsgaard, "Readers and Trespassers: Time Travel, Orthogonal Time, and Alternative Figurations of Time in *Against the Day*" in Jeffrey Severs and Christopher Leise (eds.) *Pynchon's Against the Day: A Corrupted Pilgrim's Guide* (University of Delaware Press, 2011), pp. 115-38.
- ^{xx} Simon de Bourcier, *Pynchon and Relativity: Narrative Time in Thomas Pynchon's Later Novels* (Continuum, 2012), p. 48.
- ^{xxi} Karen Barad, Rick Dolphijn, and Iris van der Tuin, "Interview with Karen Barad" in *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (Open Humanities Press, 2012), pp. 48-70.

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- ^{xxiv} See Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003).
- ^{xxv} Joanna Freer, "Thomas Pynchon, (Relative) Feminist," Berfrois, 2011, www.berfrois.com/2011/06/thomas-pynchon-relative-feminist-by-joanna-freer/, accessed 31 January 2017, n.p.
- ^{xxvi} Freer, *Thomas Pynchon and American Counterculture*, pp. 126-56.
- ^{xxvii} Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies*, 14.3 (1988), doi.org/10.2307/3178066, p. 595.
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- ^{xxix} Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 11; Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs*, 28.3 (2003), doi.org/10.1086/signs.2003.28.issue-3, p. 829.
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- ^{xxxi} Heinz Ickstadt, "History, Utopia and Transcendence in the Space-Time of *Against the Day*," *Pynchon Notes*, 54-55 (2008), doi.org/10.16995/pn.37, p. 230.
- ^{xxxii} Michael Jarvis, "Very Nice Indeed: Cyprian Latewood's Masochistic Sublime, and the Religious Pluralism of *Against the Day*," *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 1.2 (2013), doi.org/10.7766/orbit.v1.2.45, p. 13.

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