

# Narrating Preterition: Postsecularism, Analysis, and *Gravity's Rainbow*

Damian Borovsky

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**Advisor:** Dr. Lori Emerson—English Department

**Honors Council Representative:** Dr. Emily Harrington—English Department

**Defense Committee:** Dr. Deborah Whitehead—Religious Studies Department

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**Abstract:**

Recent trends in literary discourse have identified the “postsecular” in fiction, reimaginings of spiritual traditions in particularly postmodern ways. Much analysis of the postsecular posits the postsecular in fiction as an affirmation of postsecular spirituality, and celebrates its ability to describe a world “reenchanted” in postmodernity. I argue that an analysis of the postsecular which has reenchantment as its conclusion terminates too quickly, and fails to account for the ideological locus of the postsecular utopic gesture. Postsecularism, on this account, points to alternative narratives that run counter to the dominant and oppressive historical narratives of modernity. Rather than posit a return to the religious, preterite narratives seek instead to apophatically illuminate terroristic narratives of progress to allow for their deconstruction. I use Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* as a quintessential example of this account of the postsecular novel. In my conclusion, I draw upon the work of Walter Benjamin, Fredric Jameson, and Simone Weil to discuss how this reimagined postsecular narrative invokes questions regarding narrative interpretation itself, and the way literary discourse must operate under postmodernity.

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Figure 1 Paul Klee, Angelus Novus, 1920, monograph.

## Introduction:

### What is the Postsecular?

In 2008 Jürgen Habermas told the world that its more affluent and particularly Western nations could be termed “post-secular,” and that “global changes and visible conflicts that flare up in connection with religious issues give us reason to doubt whether the relevance of religion has waned.” He pointed to a growing trend amongst sociologists to disavow Max Weber’s secularization thesis—the idea that the gradual dissolution of religion and a general disenchantment with the world runs parallel to the process of modernity. Reasons for this include: the “undiminished vibrancy” of religious communities in the United States; the rise of orthodox and conservative sects in established religions globally; the trend across the world of an explosion in spiritual sects that draw previously-unreligious citizens loosely into various folds, largely due to very successful missionary work; that fundamentalisms, “such as the Pentecostals and radical Muslims,” are the fastest-growing religious movements currently; and that the instrumentation of religion for violence is seeing increased practice.<sup>1</sup> John McClure notes a trend in the sociology of religion from the 1960s to the present which he calls a third “Great Awakening,” another historical American moment in which we see an increased preoccupation with and plurality of spiritualities (“Postmodern/Postsecular” 141), and he echoes Habermas (and inverts Weber) when he tells us that “...the explosive growth of fundamentalist and pneumatic forms of organized religious practice, ‘New Age’ experiments in alternative spiritualities, and the turn toward religion in certain philosophical circles... all reflect a strong but selective disenchantment with secular values and modes of being and a determination to invent alternatives” (*Partial Faiths* 7). Ola Sigurdson writes in *Beyond Secularism? Toward a Post-Secular*

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<sup>1</sup> See Habermas, “Notes on a Postsecular Society.”

*Political Theology* that “no part of the world is as surprised over the recent upsurge of religious movements across the globe as Europe,” where Eurocentrism led to a false idea about modernization’s relationship to religion. Indeed, “in Europe more than anywhere else, it has been taken for granted that modernity and progress more or less means the decreasing importance if not the eventual disappearance of religious faiths.” The reality, he argues, is far from this: “now the correlative is modernization and pluralization” (185); or as Fredric Jameson puts in a different context, the trend today is of a “heterogeneity without a norm” (*Postmodernism* 17).<sup>2</sup>

Habermas was certainly not the first to use the term postsecular. Since the 1960s, the religious crisis of secularized modernity has been an object of inquiry for social theology, politics, and literary studies alike. In the early days of its use, it was popular in social theology to describe the necessity of religion to overcome secular social pathologies.<sup>3</sup> These theorists saw secular modernity as having created as the production of culture though not necessarily ethics, and so deep theological discourse was seen as necessary to keep the pathologies of secular modernity in check. At the tail end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, a new wave of postsecular theologians, inspired by postmodernism’s critique of modernity, took a more radical critique of secularism.<sup>4</sup> For them, as Graham Ward states, postmodernism is what allows for postsecular thinking in a secular age, and that “with postmodernism God emerges from the white-out nihilism of modern atheism and from behind the patriarchal masks imposed by modernity’s secular theology.”<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, during postsecularism’s beginnings in the 1960s and ‘70s theories emerged which view postsecularism as a kind of midway point, or dialogic conversation, between religion and secularism. Geoghegan argued

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<sup>2</sup> For more literature which traces the recent resurgence of religion, see Charles Taylor, Robert Bellah, Harvey Cox, Robert J. Ellwood, William C. McLoughlin, and Amy Hungerford. McLoughlin and Ellwood both focus on the way the sixties spiritual resurgence mimics those prior in American history, while Hungerford writes on both the resurgence of religion in America in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as how it may represent a new kind of spirituality more akin to belief in belief itself.

<sup>3</sup> See Borowitz, Graham, Greeley, and Morris.

<sup>4</sup> See Milbank, Blond, Dallmayr, Dooley, Tacey, Ward.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Parmaksiz 101.

that the secular should not be done away with by the 'post' in postsecular, but rather that there should be a recognition that the achievements of secularism will not be lost by a revised approach to religion.<sup>6</sup> Habermas, at this time, argued that religious discourse offers a semantic pool for describing and sustaining values in the modern world.<sup>7</sup> As Parmaksiz realizes, despite the overwhelming diversity of postsecular thinking there are three critical themes which undergird postsecular discourse over the past fifty years: "(1) disenchantment and loss of community/meaning; (2) the impossibility of absolute secularity; and (3) the exclusion of religion from the public sphere" (101). Furthermore, there has been a trend amongst postmodern critical theorists such as Derrida, Žižek, Badiou, and Vattimo to construct a 'messianic' moment in modernity, of the utopian democracy on the horizon or, as Žižek describes in *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*, the "Messianic longing for the Otherness that is forever 'to come;'"<sup>8</sup> in other words, what seems to be a radical politics resting on fundamentally religious semantics, a trend which perhaps points to an inability to inscribe the historical moment in purely secular narratives. This moment of postsecular critical discourse is by no means, as some would argue, hard-and-fast evidence affirming a collapse of the secular in the face of Weber's thesis.<sup>9</sup> What is more *prima facie* the case is that postmodernity sees an uneasy and unorthodox reengagement with the religious in the face of secular modernity, even if the grander historical scope points to an overall modernization-secularization correlation.<sup>10</sup>

These realizations about contemporary religion by postsecular theorists have led many literary critics to take a reflective stance on the way spiritual discourse is dealt with in postmodern American literature. Recent trends in literary criticism, which can be classed into a general discourse

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<sup>6</sup> See Geoghegan, *Religious narrative, post-secularism and utopia*.

<sup>7</sup> See the 2000 Interview with Jürgen Habermas: *Globalism, ideology, and traditions*.

<sup>8</sup> See *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* 152, and the subchapter titled '*Post-secular thought?*' *No Thanks!*

<sup>9</sup> For a far more exhaustive genealogy of postsecular discourse in politics and social theology, see Parmaksiz 98-103.

<sup>10</sup> This will seem more likely the case at the end of this paper, in the context of the rise of religious 'nones' in the United States.

on postsecular literature, show attempts to understand the phenomenon of postsecularism alongside a recognition that certain authors have already been grappling with the spiritual in postsecular ways for quite some time.

It should go without saying, given the historical parallel, that to exclude an analysis of postmodernity would be to leave much critical analysis wanting; indeed, it is an underlying assumption for most critics that postsecularism and postmodernism are at least strongly correlated. Lee Morrissey, for instance, argues that “the current usage of “postsecularism [is] a subset of a larger shift that was back then at least known as ‘postmodernism;’” or at least, it points to a general trend to name it as such amongst postmodern literary critics who place emphasis on the ways in which religion comes up in postmodern texts (99-100). Even John McClure, one of the most zealous postsecularists in favor of a (virtually) religious reading of postsecular literature, says that arguing that postsecular writers introduce their readers “to a vertiginously decentered space of juxtaposed non-secular discourses (or discursive fragments) is to argue that [their] spirituality is in one familiar sense of the word ‘postmodern.’” These texts participate in the greater trend of “discursive and ontological decentering and fragmentation” associated with the characteristically postmodern theorists (“Postmodern/Postsecular” 152). For the postsecular critic, the postsecular is the postmodern engagement with the fact that the secular and religious as modes of interpreting the world no longer cleanly divide the world between them;<sup>11</sup> and in literature, roughly speaking, this epistemic crisis is explored through what John McClure identifies as a “resacralization” of the modern world—an “ontological playfulness” which maintains a spectrum of metaphysical realities (the secular being just one) while prioritizing none of them; and, through a ‘weak’ reinterpretation of religious ideology, a general distrust toward totalizing metaphysical systems.

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<sup>11</sup> See Fessenden 156.



Yet even if it can be agreed upon that religion is seeing a critical reengagement, if not a general reinvigoration, both in the world and in literature, the general presupposition amongst scholars is that religion nowadays simply looks different. As McClure states in “Postmodern/Postsecular,” postmodern American religiosity is “often inflected with the rhetoric and values of consumer capitalism.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, how postsecular writers are to engage the religious as the latter (as well as the former) is inexorably caught up in the logic of the capitalist superstructure is going to be dramatically altered as well.

Furthermore, admitting to the undeniable relationship between postmodernism and postsecularism—one which admits to the postsecular as epiphenomenally related to postmodernism—immediately puts the postsecularist on uneasy ground. Here the discourse is split between those who would see postsecularism as a genuine resurgence of religion in the face of the unease of (post)modernity, and those who would inscribe postsecularism within the greater trend of postmodernism, thus secularizing it as another (albeit deceptive) instance of the logic of late capitalism. Presented as I have above, it might seem that the postsecular simply refers to contemporary religious pastiche, another Lyotardian “intensity” of postmodernism; yet there is good reason to be persuaded by those looking for the postsecular as an outside to postmodernity. In any case, the theoretical dichotomy will require further analysis.

Finally, the problem of what to do with the postsecular raises important questions for the practice of literary analysis itself. In particular: *what are we doing when we do literary analysis?* One way to describe the characters of postsecular fiction is to say that they dwell in an ontologically rich universe without the proper hermeneutics to meaningfully interact with it, and are therefore existentially broken down through their dismissal of the non-secular.<sup>13</sup> I would say that polemically

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<sup>12</sup> McClure 142.

<sup>13</sup> See Sierra, “Threshold of Revelation.”

secular critics are subject to this description, and that the reverse charge—that perhaps *too much* meaning is being ascribed to a secular world—can be made against those more radical and optimistic postsecular critics. In the first case one could reveal the ideological specter of secularism which has gripped literary criticism up until this point, and ask if this specter is justified; in the second, one should tread very carefully amongst the magically-charged ruins of cathedrals we thought torn down long ago in the grips of modernity's *telos*.

Jonathan Freedman, in a blurb on the back of Amy Hungerford's *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960*, said that the question of what we are to do with the sacred is “one of the great unanswered questions of contemporary literary criticism.”<sup>14</sup> I think, however, there is a more looming question for literary analysis in the postmodern moment:

*What are we to do with postsecularism?*

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Fessenden 154.

# I

## Impossible Situations

But for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified,  
the copy to the original, representation to reality, appearance to  
essence ... truth is considered profane, and only illusion is sacred.  
Sacredness is in fact held to be enhanced in proportion as truth  
decreases and illusion increases, so that the highest degree of illusion  
comes to be the highest degree of sacredness.<sup>15</sup>

In a 1987 lecture on cinema and the creative act, Gilles Deleuze discusses the tropes characterizing Fyodor's Dostoevsky's Idiot (the main character of the *Idiot*, though they appear often in Dostoevsky's characters) as they are reenvisioned in the films of Akira Kurosawa. The Idiot, he says, is one who is plagued by a profound question which the various urgencies of the present prevent from being ever properly articulated.<sup>16</sup> In *The Seven Samurai*, for instance, the immediate challenges presented to the film's seven ronin involve the defense of a small village of rice farmers against a group of bandits. This is not an insignificant endeavor—only three of the samurai survive by the end of the movie—but the question of why they perform such a duty to the villagers looms over their heads. It is only at the end of the movie, in a profound articulation by the leader of the samurai, that their position is put into perspective: after killing the last of the bandits, he announces that "in the end we lost this battle too. The victory belongs to the farmers, not to us."<sup>17</sup> The fate of the samurai in this epoch of Japan is extremely tenuous. With "noblemen [they] no longer have use for, and peasants who will soon know how to defend themselves without any assistance," Deleuze

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<sup>15</sup> Feuerbach, Preface to the second edition of *The Essence of Christianity*.

<sup>16</sup> See "Gilles Deleuze on Cinema: What is the Creative Act 1987 (English Subs)," [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a\\_hifamdISs&t=1340s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_hifamdISs&t=1340s), 16:50-21:00.

<sup>17</sup> 20:56.

tells us, the samurai are “haunted by this question which is deserving of the Idiot—which is in fact the Idiot’s question: ‘We samurai, what are we?’” For Dostoevsky, this same concept is applied to the question of God. Characters find themselves tormented by various urgencies of the present, but the more profound questions—those of salvation, of morality, of possible nihilism—are not given the time for articulation and prevent proper response to the present situation. Thus, as Deleuze tells us, “they are engaged in impossible situations.”<sup>18</sup>

Postsecular characters and postsecular literary analysis are both seemingly engaged in such an impossible situation. They resemble each other; they are both pilgrims of the postmodern sublime struggling to figure out what to do with the sacred now that it’s being apophatically embraced through an encounter with secular ideology. What are we to make of this?

In fiction, postsecular characters cannot grapple with the weight of questions regarding the spiritual, and instead trudge steadily through the present in what might be seen as a postmodern jeremiad—a pessimistic lamentation of the state of society explored through the self’s inability to find meaning in the world. Rather than attempt an articulation of the ‘more profound question,’ they instead duck their heads and move along in an uneasy mixture of hope and disbelief; or perhaps, with unsteady faith without an object of faith.

Similarly, there exists an uneasy relationship between literary analysis and matters of the religious and sacred of literary texts. On the one hand, literary analysis seems to be a strictly secular undertaking; particularly following the collapse of New Criticism, room for a more hermeneutical praxis of literary analysis—one in which the work in its inert and material form stands as a hint for some vaster reality and truth—began to diminish.<sup>19</sup> As Magdalena Mączyńska says about the introduction of postsecularism sociology, it’s “viewed as a necessary methodological corrective

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<sup>18</sup> 19:50.

<sup>19</sup> Further research could explore the relationship between the decline of New Criticism specifically and the rise of postsecular literary analysis, both of which find themselves seated firmly in the 1960s.

within a field firmly committed to the project of modernity,” and recent theoretical work has sought to “expose the secular myths underpinning modern academia without posting a return of repressed religious paradigms” (74). On the other hand, literature identified by literary critics as postsecular calls into question what literary analysis is supposed to make of the sacred in literature. Purely secular theories, like the various theories of postmodernism, are easily offered as secular reasons for the religious in contemporary literature; though perhaps there is more that literary analysis can offer in regards to the sacred as it arises.<sup>20</sup>

That being said, I wish to offer an analysis of the postsecular which places it firmly within the unstable temporality of the postmodern. Postsecular theorists already point to the American 1960s as the ideological progenitor for the postsecular, which happens to coincide directly with the beginning of cultural postmodernity (following the economic groundwork for postmodernity in 1950s, during the postwar production and commodification boom). I call this temporality unstable because, as Jameson notes, there is no deciding feature with which we can use as a cleaver to historically sever high modernism from postmodernism.<sup>21</sup> This is also obviously the case for postsecularism; and yet there exist a number of structures, symptoms, and intensities which proliferate at this time and begin to, as Jameson rearticulates Althusser, “entertain a semiautonomy

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<sup>20</sup> Though there is much debate over the semantics of the postsecular, in this context I use the ‘sacred’ as denoting moments in literature where authors seem, very intentionally, to engage positively or at least seriously with the nonsecular/metaphysical. For more on the semantics of the postsecular, see Mączyńska, Fessenden, and Ludwig.

<sup>21</sup> Perhaps a symptom of this is the difficulty theorists have encountered regarding the definitions and semantics of both postmodernism and postsecularism. ‘Postsecularism’ enjoys continued usage; “yet,” Parmaksiz tells us, “despite its wide usage and increasing academic popularity, there is still no uniform understanding of the meaning of the concept and there are serious doubts whether it has any intellectual power, import or utility” (Parmaksiz 98). Mączyńska also takes up issue with the word, first asking what the ‘post’ in ‘postsecular’ could possibly stand for (“is the ‘postsecular’ a period designation,” she asks, “pointing to that which comes after ‘the secular’? A corrective force within the momentum of secularism? Or, does the term refer not to a temporal period at all but a critical or interpretive perspective?” (73)). Ultimately, I think Mączyńska is right to fear the “impossibility of stabilizing the term itself; its shifting ideological implications; and its reliance on the outdated language of ‘religion’ and ‘secularism,’ which [continue] to burden us with its historical baggage even as we strive to transcend the binary paradigms” (Mączyńska 74).

over against [sic] each other, run at different rates of speed, develop unevenly, and yet conspire to produce a totality” (xx).<sup>22</sup>

But there is a political, rather than simply logical, reason for such a project. I will return at the end of this essay to the need for a stance on the postsecular which places it firmly in the realm of the postmodern. There are two levels of engagement at work here: The first involves the primary engagement with the text, the initial observation of the postsecular moment which began the project of extracting the postsecular from the merely postmodern itself. At this level a general discursivity in literary discourse flourishes—postsecularism, the various feminist discourses, postcolonial and race theory, thing theory, and psychoanalytic readings to name a few. But at a greater level we must always be critical of this literary discourse as well which is itself a product of postmodernity. Each model of analysis which we choose to use brings its own set of questions to the paradigm of analysis itself. This is a tricky issue: postsecular critics, for instance, admit that the texts they offer as postsecular fit into the greater trend of postmodernity; and yet that very discourse which offers the postsecular to the postmodern is *itself* a product of postmodernity. If the sacred is to be properly engaged by postsecular critics, then the critic requires a certain self-reflexivity to recognize that their approach to the sacred is itself a postmodern one, which effects the content and historical placement of that analysis. Postsecular engagements with postsecular fiction begin to look more and more like descriptions of the literary reflecting pool, each moment of the sacred looking very much like a mirror on a page.

There is certainly at least one issue here, however, which I will have to address—as does all theory which attempts to make sense of postmodernism from within postmodernism. As Jameson says, “the way in which virtually any observation about the present can be mobilized in the very

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<sup>22</sup> Further research here could unveil how exactly the symptoms and signs of postsecular discourse developed in such a way in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, though I suspect much can be parsed out from a further comparative analysis of the development of postsecular criticism.

search for the present itself and pressed into service as a symptom and an index of the deeper logic of the postmodern, which imperceptibly turns into its own theory and the theory of itself”

(*Postmodernism* xii). Pouncing upon the postsecular in a zealous attempt to find some ‘deeper logic’ within the schizophrenic present may, if we are not careful, very well resemble the pathological autoreferentiality Jameson warns of, where the void left by complete historical amnesia has been filled by desperate attempts to taste morsels of the Real in our consumption of the past—in our case, the Other or the sacred in religion (or spiritual pastiche generally).

Yet my defense of this methodology of approaching the postsecular will be the same as Jameson’s regarding *Postmodernism*. First, I do not propose here to approach any kind of thumbnail for the postsecular, for I see this as the same impossible goal (though seemingly narrower) as providing one for the postmodern. Just like postmodernism, the concept of postsecularism, “if there is one,” to echo Jameson, “has to come at the end, and not at the beginning, of our discussion of it” (xxii). To develop a criticism of the postsecular and offer a way to approach it within the postsecular moment is to change the thing itself—it would be offering the criticism to the heap of the object of criticism. We must be patient in regards to the concept of the postsecular, lest we simply fall uncritically into the radical ideological camps which would either advocate for a religious resurgence or see all religious discourse reduced to strictly secular language.

Second, the postsecular may come to be seen as the production of postsecular people. Just as Weber saw the rise of new ascetic religious values in the turn of the century as one way for people to adapt to “the delayed gratification of the emergent ‘modern’ labor process,” and just as Jameson sees postmodernism as “the production of postmodern people capable of functioning in a very peculiar socioeconomic world indeed” (xv), so too may the postsecular constitute the adaptive radiation of particular religious ideologies in response to a rapidly disenchanted landscape.

But more importantly, the postsecular in fiction and criticism, which seem inseparable as an object of analysis, reveals a grander and unconscious struggle. Just as the sacred in fiction operates as a utopic gesture and symbolic resolution towards secular modernity, so too does its engagement with critics feel more and more as the same such critique though unknown to itself. Both utilize the narratives of spiritual traditions as an attempt at depth; but modernity lays siege to the historical momentum of these traditions, and postmodernism sees them entirely severed from their own history by reducing them to pure image. The postsecular, then, should be seen as a desire for the historical narratives which have been liquidated by historicism and made epistemically unapproachable in postmodernity, the rhythms of which run at rates oppositional to oppression.

It will now be necessary to fully develop, as much as our purposes here require, a working concept of the postsecular and (and *through*) its relation to the postmodern, such that we can properly imagine its relationship to postmodernity.

### *The Postsecular*

In suggesting that many postmodern texts are shot through with and even shaped by spiritual concerns, I mean several things: that they make room in the worlds they project for magic, miracle, metaphysical systems of retribution and restoration; that they explore fundamental issues of conduct in ways that honor, interrogate, and revise religious categories and prescriptions; that their political analyses and prescriptions are intermittently but powerfully framed in terms of magical or religious conceptions of power. But I mean as well, that their assaults on realism, their ontological playfulness, and their experiments in the sublime represents a complex and variously inflected reaffirmation of premodern ontologies—constructions of reality that portray the quotidian world as but one dimension of a multidimensional cosmos, or as a hosting of a world of spirits.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> John McClure, "Postmodern/Postsecular."



A cursory description of the canon of postsecular fiction, as it's constructed and labelled by the postsecular critics themselves, will bring to the surface a number of common themes.<sup>24</sup> I don't suppose to offer anything like a conclusive and exhaustive description of the symptoms of the postsecular (an impossible task) but I do hope to reveal its relationship to postmodernity. Postsecularism is the engagement of the spiritual in postmodernity, and therefore carries with it the symptoms of postmodernity.

First, as Magdalena Mączyńska notes in "Towards a Postsecular Literary Criticism," the postsecular is not simply "a resurgence of religious concerns in contemporary culture," which can be conceptualized as "a negation of the modern negation"—a direct assault against the logic of secularism. Rather, she says, the postsecular can more profitably function as a way to "question the very construction of the religious/secular binary, seeking flexible re-alignments based on the work of other theoretical subfields" (76). Rather than posit a simple return to the religious, the postsecular could help deconstruct our constructions of the religious and secular through a revision of their conceptualization. Postsecular texts could therefore be offered as examples in the destabilization of the religious/secular dichotomy, solidifying its context within the general historical destabilization of meaning in postmodernity.

Postsecular texts engage this destabilization by working within it, destabilizing the exclusive authority of secular narratives with partial narratives. the preface to *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison*, John McClure provides a rough description of the characteristics of postsecular authors. "All of them," he says,

tell stories about new forms of religiously inflected seeing and being. And in each case, the forms of faith they invent, study, and affirm are dramatically partial and open-ended. They do not provide, or even aspire to provide, any full "mapping" of the reenchanting cosmos. They do not promise anything like full redemption. And

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<sup>24</sup> For this section I will largely be drawing upon the work of John McClure, to who's extensive analytical work in this field many postsecular critics are indebted—though I make sure to provide attention to significant and valuable deviations from McClure's project.

they are partial in another sense as well in that they are selectively dedicated to progressive ideals of social transformation and well-being. In all these respects, of course, postsecularism is at odds with resurgent fundamentalism. (ix)

By “seeing and being,” McClure takes an approach to postsecularism which fundamentally regards a kind of existentialism faced by postsecular characters, where “seeing” alludes to the characters’ epistemologies and “being” to metaphysics. Postsecular characters, in a sense, borrow from the religious tradition in order to provide themselves with enough comfort to get by. And yet this is nothing like complete ontological security or euphoria, or “full redemption.” What is more often the case is a kind of tentative reaching by postsecular characters, a hopeful stretch into the unknown in the face of what is known but is not enough.

This is one of the two ways in which postsecularism is at odds with fundamentalisms. To be sure, fundamentalisms are popular because they *do* provide a full mapping of the cosmos; thus, “religion returns,” McClure echoes theorist Gianni Vattimo, “as it always has, when worldly life becomes intolerable” (10). But the word “reenchanted” which McClure uses points to another significant difference between postsecularism and fundamentalism. Fundamentalism—or, more specifically, its resurgence in the modern world—can be seen as a response to the *disenchantment* of the world. Though paths to fundamentalism may vary, in this context the initial shove comes from a desire for enchantment. The postsecular, on the other hand, is a response to a world viewed as already enchanted reenchanting.

McClure points to Vattimo to explain the socio-historical moment of postsecularism, stating how it’s the result of “the historical weakening of confidence in secular-rational promises of peace and progress and the philosophical weakening of secular reason’s claims to exclusive authority on matters of the real” (11). In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, for instance, the leaders of the secular world (CEO’s, Generals, Presidents) preach “Rocket state-cosmology” (32) and have created a world of absolute hostility and destruction, where mass organized religion is entirely absent; indeed, it’s challenged by

the pervasiveness of supernatural entities. Confidence in leaders to deliver us into peace has failed, and their descriptions of the world fails alongside it.

The initial shove for postsecular characters comes from the (newly) spiritually charged world itself. The ‘postsecular pilgrims,’ as McClure labels them,<sup>25</sup> are secular to begin with—it is only through undeniable interaction with the spiritual, the sacred, that they are forced to reevaluate their position. Thus, in Tony Kushner’s play *Angel’s in America*, Prior Walters—a gay man who contracts AIDS and whose partner leaves him as a result—does not himself turn to, say, the church for comfort during such an impossibly difficult time. Rather, McClure relates, he begins having unexplainable visions, encounters with angels, intrusions into other character’s dreams. Rather than go looking for the supernatural himself, “the supernatural literally breaks in on him” (1).

This breaking in of the supernatural is important for postsecular fiction in that it sets up a general historical context in which secular constructions of the world are taken for granted and then given up on; and yet the response postsecular characters have to this assault by the unexplainable is not nearly as simple as McClure describes. “When we last see [Prior],” McClure says, “he is feeling better, studying the Bible, and pursuing his commitment to gay liberation” (2)—an easy enough conclusion to digest. And yet many novels offer no such chance for any liberation. Rather, though certain characters may be able to enjoy what the postsecular offers them, often the religious reenchantment of the world is confusing and even hostile to the characters. It does not, in an act of hostility, breach the secure insulation the modern, secular world provides—*all* of postsecular fiction, it seems to me, is polemic against the insulation of modern life. But it does put warning signs down

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<sup>25</sup> It should be noted that it is language like this, where McClure clearly takes a religious return coupled with ‘open practice’ (his explorative conclusion to *Partial Faiths*) as both a means to overcoming the anxiety of modernity as well as an end itself which leads critics like Mączyńska and Fessenden to be cautious of his excessively religious (specifically Catholic) motives.

by the road of boundless religious/metaphysical exploration as an escape characters would take from the secular world.<sup>26</sup>

Crucial as well, it seems, to McClure's partial turns is that the characters are able to retrospectively pursue a life committed to secular ideals and values, i.e. Prior's pursuit of gay liberation after a partial turn towards Christianity. Obviously, the fact that religious enchantment is not always greeted warmly and embraced by postsecular characters offers one obstacle to this ideal. Another is that the conclusions to many postsecular fictions are often as open-ended (and sometimes pessimistic) as are the various faiths embraced by the characters, providing the reader with little hope that the pursuit of secular values after the fact is even possible.<sup>27</sup> In *Blood Meridian*, for instance, the novel ends with the protagonist—simply called “the man”—entering an outhouse with judge Holden, the evil demiurge figure of the novel, who embraces him. Later, when one character tells another “I wouldn't go in there if I were you” (the outhouse) he goes in anyway, responding with “Good God almighty” (347-348). Obviously, the protagonist will not be able to pursue a life of much of anything following the novel's conclusion; whatever might be imagined regarding the man, there does not seem to be much room left for him to pursue anything at all. These open endings do more than just reflect the desire for postsecular authors to depict a world potentially shot through with the sacred without prioritizing any specific account of its supernaturalism; they also call into question the purpose of such a resacralization itself.

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<sup>26</sup> Kathryn Ludwig, for instance, offers an excellent analysis of such a critique of modern insulation in Don DeLillo's *Underworld*. In, she claims, characters experience a turning towards the religious very similar to the ones described by McClure. What's unique here, however, is that this turning “consists in movement from attempts at ‘buffering’ to the acceptance of ‘porousness’” (85). Ludwig posits this as demonstrative of the “in-between” world we now inhabit, in which old categories of sacred and profane are left behind and the vulnerability of spiritual porousness embraced (90).

<sup>27</sup> But there is an underlying assumption of McClure's are worth deconstructing. The assumption, or rather ideology, of McClure's is that at the heart of the utopic aspect of the postsecular impulse is secular virtue. Not only should we be weary of the potential for this ideology to blanket the various motives of postsecular authors, but it directly coincides with Fessenden's worry regarding “the persistence of this [secular] narrative in governing even the newer, postsecular plots that would disturb it” (Fessenden 155). Even if we are to take a secular and even postmodern approach to the postsecular, we should not unfairly couch the allure of postsecular thought in secular ideology to embellish its appeal.

The incomplete turn by postsecular characters to untotalizing systems of belief is central to McClure's account of postsecularism, and he describes this very same modernist trope of impossibility articulated by Deleuze in the reformulation of the postsecular. "Postsecular pilgrims," he says, experience a kind of partial conversion which, like the statement of the leader of the samurai, point towards some understanding the 'more profound' question. And yet, unlike the clarity offered by the samurai's statement:

The partial conversions of postsecular fiction do not deliver those who experience them from worldliness into well-ordered systems of religious belief. Instead, they tend to strand those who experience them in the ideologically mixed and confusing middle zones of the conventional conversion narrative, zones through which the conventional protagonist passes with all possible haste, on his way to a domain of secure religious dwelling. (4)

The "secure religious dwelling" is never quite found, and though characters may pursue this goal to the very end it's not convincing they ever even believe they'll make it. Crucially, well-ordered systems of religious belief—the institutional churches, or total disenchantment itself (a key aspect of scientific dogmatism)—are shunned as ridiculous at best or dangerous at worst, and the ways in which these systems marginalize and oppress many is often expressed implicitly through their very dismissal. Erik Sierra points towards the tendencies for the closed systems shunned by postsecular fiction as maintaining totalitarian and colonial pathologies, writing that postsecular spiritualities "soften the potentially violent edge of such 'closed systems' as religious fundamentalism, whose vaunted epistemic claims fuels the drive for global conquest and control" (16). Thus, the profane abounds in the form of ruined churches, violence against religious figures, idolatry, cruel scientific experiments, etc., and is replaced instead by an openly plural spiritual bricolage. However, these partial faiths do not offer any kind of well-mapped cosmos. "Gods appear," McClure says, "but not God" (4). The sacred here serves to destabilize any clear understanding of the natural world but without offering any sort of alternative in its place. Yet, as McClure notes, the characters aren't very anxious to "straighten things out," either.

Sierra sees the postsecular move away from closed systems as a move towards the weakening of knowledge, a reinstatement of mystical knowledge by way of apophasis, “the *via negative* of negative theology and open mystical experience” which “neutralizes violence.” Yet there are two regimes to be wary of: the regimes of religious fundamentalism on the one hand and rationalism on the other. This rationalism produces a “soul weary nihilism,” and “this nihilism itself arises from being immersed in a universe throbbing with sublime energy while lacking the epistemological equipment for meaningful interaction with it” (17). Both extremes can lead to violence, as Sierra points out with the climactic scene towards the end of *White Noise*, where Jack Gladney, a secular man haunted by the sublime energies of the modern technological world, tries to murder Willy Mink (who Sierra points out is the only major non-white character). “If in DeLillo’s fiction the enclosure of consciousness in totalizing cognitive systems produces violence,” he continues, “what we find in *White Noise* is a radically *open* system—a pathological systemlessness—generating its own economy of violence” (20). The solution, then, is “ontological participation,” a struggling toward a strong antifoundationalism accomplished through an encounter with “the face of the living, breathing Other.”

What this overview of the postsecular reveals is a number of things. First, postsecular characters start from secular beginnings, themselves emerging like ghosts from the “white out space of nihilism.” Second, their necessity to turn to the spiritual stems from the world itself, its inability to be described secularly. Third, these conversions are incomplete, partially due to the characters’ distrust of religious traditions, but also because, just like the secular narratives, these systems fail to provide a complete mapping of the world. Finally, we end up with a partially-reenchanted world and a partial faith to make sense of it, produced from a spiritual bricolage made in the postmodern yard sale of history, which posits no one tradition hierarchically over another. The traditions of religion, such as scripture and ritual, which are tools employed in the service of describing the world, are

appropriated into the service of partial faith. But their emphasis is on the characters' experience with the tools, rather than the strict metaphysical validity of their use; they do not posit universality.

With this overview of postsecular fiction in place, I'll now present a look at the postmodern which will reveal how postsecularism sits inside it; and this is more than simple comparative analysis between the two dialectics. Without postmodernism, postsecularism begs the question of political substance; and an understanding of postsecularism that begins from a postmodern perspective of the movement—in both literature and criticism—will hopefully flesh out what can be said politically of the postsecular.

### *The Postmodern*

What follows paradoxically as a consequence is that... the postmodern must be characterized as a situation in which the survival, the residue, the holdover, the archaic, has finally been swept away without a trace. In the postmodern, then, the past itself has disappeared (along with the well-known "sense of the past" or historicity and collective memory). Where its buildings still remain, renovation and restoration allow them to be transferred to the present in their entirety as those other, very different and postmodern things called simulacra.<sup>28</sup>

Fredric Jameson's account of postmodernity<sup>29</sup> critically begins with the description of the total secularization of contemporary society, especially now that the "precapitalist enclaves" of Nature and the Unconscious have been "penetrated and colonized" by the expansion of multinational capital (Jameson 49). This is a position Jameson wears boldly on his sleeve: on the first page of the introduction to *Postmodernism; or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, he writes that

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<sup>28</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism*.

<sup>29</sup> I should say here that often I update Jameson's use of the word "postmodernism" to "postmodernity" to refer specifically to the socio-historical period and its natural symptoms rather than the intentional and critical engagement with those symptoms.

postmodernity “is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good... in which ‘culture’ has become a veritable ‘second nature’” (1). This colonization results in every aspect of our lives being retranscribed and reified within the logic of the cultural dominant—in our case capitalism. Unlike the previous modernisms (which fought against notions of the “sacred” with visible violence; the ultimately terroristic grand narratives of progress), postmodernity is “effortlessly secular,” working with such quiet and violent efficiency as to subvert notions of the sacred before they can even be described; rather than act in opposition to the sacred, it invisibly subsumes it. The result is that we find ourselves, as McClure understands it, in a moment of “historically unprecedented homogeneity” (McClure 144); or, ironically, “a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm” (Jameson 17). The subsumption of the external world into the logic of late capitalism means that there cannot exist any Other to capitalism—all modes of life are transcribed within it; and yet the result of this is a host of eclectic styles, an explosion of “heterogeneity” but one which only masks as difference and is really the same underneath in all cases; pastiche that is different for difference’s sake.

Jameson identifies several symptoms which result from this situation. The first is “depthlessness,” a superficiality which he says is “perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms” (9). To illustrate this point, he compares van Gogh’s *A Pair of Shoes* and Andy Warhol’s *Diamond Dust Shoes*. van Gogh’s painting, exemplary of modernism, invites the viewer toward a hermeneutic completion of the world to which the painting itself offers only a snippet, “a clue or symptom for some vaster reality which replaces it as its ultimate truth” (8). This is a utopian gesture, a revelation in the drab and backbreaking quotidian of peasant life where the painting itself is offered as a semiautonomous space divided from the body of Capital itself.

*Diamond Dust Shoes*, on the other hand, allows for no such hermeneutical approach—“I am tempted to say that it does not really speak to us at all,” he writes (8). There is no way to complete



the hermeneutic gesture towards the string of dead objects in Warhol's painting. Furthermore, what is so striking about Warhol's work is that it rests heavily upon the increasing intensity of commodity fetishism and commercialization of culture in society; yet one is hard pressed to identify what it is *exactly* that his soup cans and Coca-Cola bottles say to this subject. If they are not powerful and critical political statements regarding the subject, "one would surely want to know why, and one would want to begin to wonder a little more seriously about the possibilities of political or critical art in the postmodern period of late capital" (9).

This brings us to another feature of postmodern culture, which Jameson calls "the waning of affect." Again turning to modernism as a comparison, Edvard Munch's *The Scream* is a canonical expression of "what used to be called the age of anxiety;" yet at once it "disconnects its own aesthetic of expression, all the while being imprisoned within it." The scream itself is incompatible with its own medium (the painting—underscored by the character's lack of ears) and yet the sonic yell becomes transcribed in loops and spirals which become the very geography of the universe where pain itself speaks through the material world, an amplification of the themes of isolation and anxiety (14). Jameson sees this as pointing to the idea that within postmodernity concepts such as anxiety and alienation are no longer appropriate. The newer image is the ideal situation for the postmodern schizophrenic, who is "easy enough to please provided only an eternal present is thrust before the eyes" (10). The alienation of the subject—a prominent theme in modernism—is replaced by the subject's fragmentation, a circumstance in which strong affectual expression is no longer possible; the subject simply does not possess the autonomy for affect. With this waning of affect there also comes the death of style itself, a liberation not just from anxiety but from every other feeling as well, "since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling" (15).

The waning of affect is significant for another reason: in contemporary theory and discourse (itself a postmodern phenomenon) the waning of affect can be realized in the discrediting of

hermeneutic “depth” models of interpretation (the examples Jameson gives in *Postmodernism* are (1) of the dialectics of essence and appearance, (2) the Freudian model of the latent or manifest, (3) the existential model of authenticity and inauthenticity, and (4) the semiotic opposition between signifier and signified (12)). These have been replaced instead by a host of practices, discourses, and textual play which point again to a replacement of depth with surface/multiple surfaces, the movement from strong meaning to excessive discursiveness.

The disappearance of the subject as monad and the unavailability of style which it entails leads to the production of pastiche. The autonomous subject was crucial to the production of works wrapped in styles designed to effect the consumer of the work. Now that the autonomous subject no longer exists, however, there is nothing left to do but imitate the styles of the past in an empty parody without vocation. “Parody,” he says, “found a fertile area in the idiosyncrasies of the moderns and their ‘inimitable’ styles;” but in the emergence of the postmodern era we find instead an explosion into distinct styles, a linguistic fragmentation that signifies the collapse of any “great collective project.” “If the ideas of the ruling class were once the dominant (or hegemonic) ideology of bourgeois society, the advanced capitalist countries today are now a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm” (16-18).

Pastiche operates in the dead language of the cannibalized past. Without the ability to generate new distinct styles, contemporary culture is forced to consume the past for the sake of cultural production itself. In a 1993 interview with David Foster Wallace, Larry McCaffery call to attention the trend amongst many postmodern writers to return to forms of previous generations, to which Wallace replies that “the postmodern founders’ patricidal work was great, but patricide produces orphans.”<sup>30</sup> Outside of the shadow of the “greats” of literature, postmodern authors writhe exposed in the sun. Yet attempts to return to the forms and styles of the past don’t bring with them

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<sup>30</sup> See <https://www.dalkeyarchive.com/a-conversation-with-david-foster-wallace-by-larry-mccaffery/>.

the strength of those styles. The past that is represented in pastiche is a mirage of the actual historical moment which we have no connection to; it is like, Jameson says, Plato's simulacrum, the copy of the thing which never existed in the first place. They are introduced only through the logic of spectacular commodity, an addiction to a vast collection of dusty and depthless images.

Finally, pastiche leads to Jameson's most significant point about postmodernism. The disappearance of the individual subject, which necessarily entails the disappearance of style and the need for pastiche to engender cultural production, leads to a crisis of historicity, an "historical amnesia." The cultural artifacts of today, which so clearly yet so ambiguously recall the styles of the past (or at least, the *image* of such styles) lay about like heaps of fragments belonging to no greater cultural project. Our consumption of the past is unable to reproduce the historical weight of it in the mere reproduction of its image, such that "the survival, the residue, the holdover, the archaic, has finally been swept away without a trace. In the postmodern, then, the past itself has disappeared (along with the well-known "sense of the past" or historicity and collective memory)" (309). Not only that, but in this meaningless reproduction of the image of the past we find another pathology: the inability to properly produce representation of our own current reality.

Despite Habermas' invocation that the vast majority of Americans still profess to having significant religious beliefs, the nature of these beliefs, according to Jameson, have been somehow undergirded by the logic of capitalism:<sup>31</sup>

It would be abusive or sentimental to account for such new "religious" formations by way of an appeal to some universal human appetite for the spiritual, in a situation in which spirituality virtually by definition no longer exists: the definition in question is in fact that of postmodernism itself. (Jameson 387)

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<sup>31</sup> Research by the Pew Research Society shows the rise in the U.S. of religious 'nones,' those who self-identify as atheist or agnostic, and, furthermore, such nones themselves are becoming less and less religious—something which calls into question Habermas' previous claims about the rise of religion in the U.S.

McClure finds Jameson's "effort to produce an effortlessly secular and utterly desacralized present" to be "unpersuasive but illuminating" (144). He argues that Jameson simply ignores the persistence, both in America and around the globe, of religious traditions, which seek to reterritorialize themselves in a landscape already reterritorialized by late capitalism. The result is not always an 'untainted' spiritual, which McClure is sensitive to:

Thus the many-sided scandal of contemporary American spirituality: that it remains so vigorous, that it is so often politically engaged and so often entangled with consumerism and sensationalism, and that it is increasingly culturally eccentric in its inspiration and practices. (McClure 141)

The effects of late capitalism are not, McClure argues, without their trace, both in persisting religious traditions and the previously-described new religious traditions which Jameson dismisses (Californian syncretism, the steady rise of the megachurch); but that is not to deny the existence, persistence, and penetrative forces of the spiritual/sacred within postmodernism. Rather, the constant emergence of the sacred within postmodernism points towards a consciously resistant effort for resacralization which can only be understood properly with the help of "secular theorists," such as Jameson, who tend to ignore it (McClure 144).

But within postmodernism, religion cannot remember the weight of its past; like all things postmodern, it lacks knowledge of its own historicity. Yet, ironically, this is what keeps religion alive in the landscape of late capitalism, and keeps late capitalism on its toes—without much weight it floats perfectly amidst the confetti of (always positive, always celebratory) beliefs which now float about us, pour into the streets and collect in the gutter, free for anyone to grab if they so catch their eye. Much like Jameson's "inverted millenarianism" of postmodernism, in which premonitions of the future have been replaced by "the end of this or that" (1), the new religious discourse can only find purchase in small isolation, steering clear of totality and the history of violence such institutions possess; it has eschewed fruitless attempts at constructing complete systems in favor of appeal to some immediate issue.

The overarching reality that postmodern characters have to deal with is indeed the same as ours, that of postmodernity. Postsecular characters, as McClure identifies, are struck by the pervasiveness of the sacred as it penetrates the secular present, in a way that forces them to reach into the past and pull out the historical religious tools necessary to make sense of it.

I will not argue that perhaps in some cases there is certainly an attempt by postsecular writers to reenchant a disenchanted world. Yet, there are certainly many cases of the postsecular in which reenchantment is not taken by postmodern authors as an end itself, but a means for some other (political) assertion.<sup>32</sup> Towards the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*, for instance, we find Slothrop absolutely lost in the wilds of post-War Germany, encountering spirits of the hill tops and rivers and playing his harmonica in Whitmanesque paradise. The result of this enchantment is not, however, utopia for Slothrop. He disappears from the novel, uselessly evaporating in the struggle against the rise of multinational corporatism; not only evaporates from the struggle, but perhaps physically dissipates himself. The reenchantment for Slothrop certainly does not constitute an option Pynchon provides for how to survive under postmodernity—I would argue this is a moment of self-aware pastiche on Pynchon's behalf, a reflection on the inability for American Transcendentalism to be pulled from the dusty desk drawer of U.S. counter-culture as a viable option for survival today. Perhaps ultimately pessimistic, Pynchon recognizes that the forces of postmodern capitalism have no kryptonite; there is no perfect counterbalance to the hegemonic power of the cultural dominant (what has led some to see Pynchon as the author of the “postmodern jeremiad”).<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> This also ignores the greater thrust of this essay; namely, even if we are to admit, at a basic analytic level, that certain postsecular authors take reenchantment (inasmuch as it's approached in a postsecular, rather than strictly religious, sense) as an end itself, what are we to *make* of these attempts for postsecular reenchantment in the greater cultural context?

<sup>33</sup> See Marcus Smith and Khachig Tololyan, “The New Jeremiad: *Gravity's Rainbow*.”

There is not time here to properly describe the logic of postmodern faith.<sup>34</sup> However, what I hope to have invoked is the sense in which the logic of postsecularism rests upon and is symptomatic of postmodernity. In particular, the postsecular spiritual narratives—in their partiality—seem somewhat afflicted by this inability to think historically, to be infatuated with the images of religion and ritual alone. To see this we must turn to the literature, the postmodern/postsecular novel (narrative productions of a very strange culture indeed), and drag from its depths the fossils and the ore of the sacred. From this textual excavation I hope not only to find the relics of the symptoms of postmodern culture—and not unlike the archeologist unearthing an underground city, the map of which already exists—but to invoke, in the concrete, why exactly the postsecular (along with the rest of literary analysis) belongs to the realm of the political.

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<sup>34</sup> In a short (two page) section of *Partial Faiths* entitled “The Logic of Partial Belief,” McClure attempts (with the help of Vattimo) to explain the new impulse for the creation of postsecular communities, as well as why these communities look ‘postsecular’ rather than simply religious, or even fundamentalist. There is certainly a wealth of literature deconstructing the logic and history of postsecular faith from theorists such as Gianni Vattimo, Richard Rorty, Derrida, John Caputo, Courtney Bender, and Charles Taylor. Though McClure’s cursory glance at the philosophy may indeed be frustrating, I certainly provide a working theory of the rise of what’s been called “weak theology” (following in Derrida’s footsteps); or rather, a theory which is able to fully instantiate a framework for weak theology/postsecular religion such that it might be properly seen, as Jameson says in a different context, as an epiphenomenal projection of infrastructural realities.

## II

**Thomas Pynchon: Preterition Under the Cartel**

I have seen  
the winged man, and he was no  
angel.<sup>35</sup>

What *Gravity's Rainbow* offers is a postsecular narrative in three parts. In the first, its launch into a cosmos populated by strange gods and ghosts—an overtly hostile world in the grips of the second World War—postsecular spirituality is offered as a way to combat the hostility of the secular world and make sense of the various and undeniable spiritual rhythms. The narrative's *brennschluss* depicts a turning point in which capitalism undeniably creeps from the shadows in anticipation of the potential for reterritorialization and “cartelization” of a post-war Europe. Third, the descent is marked by excessive fragmentation of narrative, employment of commodity culture, pervasive unfreedom and pessimism, and a fundamental termination of narrative produced by the completion of this process of cartelization/postmodernization, forcing us to ask if this descent ever ends.

Early on in *Gravity's Rainbow* we encounter the character closest to what might be called the novel's protagonist, Tyrone Slothrop, as he becomes increasingly involved on-scene where Nazi rockets have fallen in London. The American helps salvage people from the wreckage, looking for “some exposed hand or brightness of skin... survivor or casualty.” Slothrop finds himself doing a miraculously banal thing: “When he couldn't help he stayed clear, praying, at first, conventionally to God, first time since the other Blitz, for life to win out.” And yet, as we'd expect early on in a postsecular novel, such prayers are as futile as they feel: “But too many were dying, and presently, seeing no point, he stopped” (25). Slothrop's initial reach into the comforting world of spiritual tradition ends dismissively and as quickly as it comes. In the world of WWII London Slothrop's

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<sup>35</sup> R.S. Thomas, ‘The Refusal.’

prayers are never answered, nor were ever even expected to be. Thus, “Slothrop’s Progress: London the secular city instructs him: turn any corner and he can find himself inside a parable” (25).<sup>36</sup>

The world of the first part of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, we are told, is a secular one. Slothrop’s hyperawareness to his surroundings points to his projections upon a disenchanted (and quite hostile) landscape of rubble and regressing gables, wartime bureaucracy and smoldering plaster, in which anything can be taken as a moral or transcendental sign. This is quintessentially modernist—Brian McHale points to a symptom of modernist fiction (as opposed to postmodernist) as an epistemological concern in the ability for rationalism and empiricism to properly project the world, which leads not only to a crisis of knowledge, but a celebration in and embracing of subjective projection, a freedom to “fictionalize” (quoted in McClure 27). And yet, as Steven Weisenburger notes in *A Gravity’s Rainbow Companion*, the part “spans nine days of the Advent and Christmas season” (15), the first instance of a theme of mystical chronological alignment which the entire novel fits into, where the temporal rhythm of the novel closely follows spiritual traditions. Weisenburger continues to say that the characters of this first part stand poised to experience an anticipated revelation (which never comes), the Advent placing the Nativity as perhaps one such revelatory narrative. Pynchon here wants us to consider the possibility that his surrealisms which will occur throughout the novel are subjective projections; but his incessant use of the spiritual to structure the novel itself, as well as the hyperreality of the various bizarre (and often disturbing) scenes throughout the novel, pressure us to come up with a better response. Already, Weisenburger notes, “Pynchon’s satire quickly erases the boundary between sacred and secular,” but his “depictions of

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<sup>36</sup> An obvious reference to John Bunyan’s 1678 protestant novel *A Pilgrim’s Progress from This World, to That Which Is to Come*; or, as Weisenburger notes, it could be reference to Hogarth’s series “The Rake’s Progress.” The eight lithographs depict Tom Rakewell’s descent from the company of gentlemen to, eventually, debtor’s prison, which corresponds, loosely, to the eight identities which Slothrop adopts as he moves through Europe later in the novel (Weisenburger 33). Yet, neither are perfect analogies for Slothrop: he most certainly does not find heaven at the end of his tale (such as in the *Pilgrim’s Progress*), nor is his descent one of simple squander and sin.



technological, psychological, and paranormal research all demonstrate how modern culture secularizes that redemptive hope” (15).

What I would first like to do is offer a postsecular analysis of the novel, the thesis of which—that Pynchon presents an ontologically playful and spiritually inflected world in order to disturb secular notions of the real—will be much along the lines of scholars such as McClure. I hope, by doing so, to show that an analysis which terminates in such a conclusion as an endorsement of open spiritual practice does so too quickly.

*Pynchon Postsecular: Ontological Playfulness and the Bright Hand of God*

In harsh-edged echo, Titans stir far below. They are all the presences  
we are not supposed to be seeing—wind gods, hilltop gods, sunset  
gods—that we train ourselves away from to keep from looking  
further even though enough of us do, leave Their electric voices  
behind in the twilight at the edge of town and move into the  
constantly parted cloak of our nightwalk till...<sup>37</sup>

The very landscape of the world Slothrop inhabits is characterized in quasi-religious analogy. In the first case, the new German rockets which pummel the city, the A4, as we repeatedly hear throughout the novel, “travels faster than the speed of sound. The first news you get of it is the blast. Then, if you’re still around, you hear the sound of it coming in.” Pirate Prentice, a British intelligence agent, muses whether “if it should hit *exactly*—ahh, no—for a split second you’d have to feel the very point, with the terrible mass above, strike the top of the skull...” (8).

Pynchon would have us ask what difference this kind of rocket is from the “great bright hand reaching out of the cloud,” the hand of God coming down to claim another preterite soul (30), if not analogously in effect then at least psychologically for the characters. This image of God’s hand

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<sup>37</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*.

recurs in a lengthy discussion of Slothrop's protestant-American heritage, first as an engraving on the tombstone of his ancestor Constant Slothrop (father of Variable Slothrop) (27), and onwards as a steady theme that maintains itself within the secular capitalist history of the protestant Slothrop line:

They began as fur traders, cordwainers, salters and smokers of bacon, went on into glassmaking, became selectmen, builders of tanneries, quarriers of marble. Country for miles around gone to necropolis, gray with marble dust, dust that was the breaths, the ghosts, of all those fake-Athenian monuments going up elsewhere across the Republic. Always elsewhere. The money seeping its way out through stock portfolios more intricate than any genealogy: what stayed home in Berkshire went into timberland whose diminishing green reaches were converted acres at a clip into paper—toilet paper, banknote stock, newsprint—a medium or ground for shit, money, and the Word. They were not aristocrats, no Slothrop ever made it into the Social Register or the Somerset Club—they carried on their enterprise in silence, assimilated in life to the dynamic that surrounded them thoroughly as in death they would be to churchyard earth. Shit, money, and the Word, the three American truths, powering the American mobility, claimed the Slothrops, clasped them for good to the country's fate. (28)

Given that the novel takes place entirely in England and continental Europe during WWII, it becomes easy to forget that *Gravity's Rainbow* is fundamentally an American novel concluding the long sixties (published in 1973). This passage relating the economic genealogy of the Slothrops—a stand-in not only for the protestant history of New England America but for Pynchon's own ancestry as well—is one which exemplifies the ideological movement from the protestant work ethic to capitalism. The name Slothrop may also provide an indication of this as well, perhaps referencing the English Anglican clergyman John Lothrop, one of the first to settle in Massachusetts and to endorse the separation of church and state.

As the landscape itself becomes transformed, hacked and harvested to wipe the asses of a rapidly expanding economy, the spirit of the sacred retreats into the silent and invisible. The people themselves dissolve into the economy in a way which parallels the decomposition of the body into “churchyard earth;” yet Pynchon seems to maintain the spirit of the sacred throughout what can only be described as the colonialization of Nature by capitalism which Jameson articulates. He

would not have us forget that the spirit of the bright hand of God ready to pluck the preterite from the earth (or rather, thrust them into the churchyard's) is still, however weakly, maintained by this line of Slothropian ghosts of the late capital landscape. Beyond the accumulation of modern pathologies—"fake-Athenian" pastiche, the levelling of shit and money with the Word of God, the ironic rape of the American landscape into necropolis for the rationalization of society—lingers spectrally the dregs of religious genealogy (in a way which strongly invokes Derrida and Mark Fisher's theory of Hauntology).

Perhaps it is a good time to note as well, as McClure does, Pynchon's indebtedness to the theories of Max Weber (mentioned by name in the novel). In *The Protestant Ethic* Weber traces the ideologies of capitalism back to the ideologies of Protestantism. He argues that, under Calvinism, Western society reached unprecedented levels of "disenchantment" and modernization. Within the "tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order," he writes, "the technical and economic conditions of machine production... determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism... with irresistible force until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt" (quoted in McClure 29). Pynchon not only attempts to depict the mechanical determination of people's lives under a techno-economic system beyond any one character's comprehension—*Gravity's Rainbow* is a tremendous modern cosmos itself (including over 400 characters), large enough that we, the readers, feel small attempting to delineate its winding alleys and subconscious lapses into drug-induced hallucinations. But he also saturates it with the sacred in a way that reflects the inevitability of such sacred penetration within such a cosmos. Pynchon points early on to an American spiritual tradition which has had roots, however thin, work through the ideological history of the country from its first protestant preachers (Pynchon's ancestors) down to his own writing of *Gravity's Rainbow* itself. The novel, according to this interpretation, then stands as a postmodern reengagement with that

tradition, perhaps to unearth those roots in a textual environment where they can more openly flourish.

One such way Pynchon does this is by levelling scientific and magical discourse. At this point in the novel, Slothrop is entirely unaware that he is under constant surveillance by both intelligence and paranormal research institutions for his ability to predict the rocket strikes with his erections. Experimented on by behavioral scientist Laszlo Jamf as a child (who never entirely “unconditioned” Slothrop from his stimulus) the A4s always seem to land a few days after one of Slothrop’s escapades at exactly the spot where he’s had it. Furthermore, the strikes fall according to a perfect Poisson distribution, a real probability equation which predicts random occurrences in a fixed area over a set time. Characters offer various theories regarding why this might be the case, in a scene which magnificently parodies the postmodern discursiveness of interpretive frameworks. Roger Mexico, a statistician (and master of the Poisson), shakily points to “statistical oddity.” Another character points to a precognition in Slothrop which allows him to subconsciously know where the rockets will fall and when. Another, “the most Freudian of psychical researchers,” thinks Slothrop is psychokinetically causing the rockets to fall where they do and, certainly, “sex *does* come into [his] theory.” “He subconsciously needs to abolish all trace of the sexual Other,” the character tells us, “whom he symbolizes on his map, most significantly, as a *star*; that anal-sadistic emblem of classroom success which so permeates elementary education in America...” The researchers scramble to come up with a secular understanding of the phenomena. However, not only are they entirely unsuccessful, but Pynchon makes it clear how their theories are quasi-religious anyway, resting heavily upon their own biases and grandiose—practically metaphysical—assumptions.

The failure of these secular and postmodern theorists is perhaps made evident by their ultimate failure to secure Slothrop (and delineate his strange powers) by the end of the novel. Pointsman, the Pavlovian scientist in charge of Slothrop’s case, springs one foiled plan after another,

ending with his unemployment in the postwar bureaucracy. After a final failed attempt to simply castrate Slothrop, he is deferred to a minor project studying dogs and is reduced to a small office, “the rest of the space having been taken over by an agency studying options for nationalizing coal and steel” (625).<sup>38</sup> The Psychological Intelligence Schemes for Expediting Surrender, or PISCES,<sup>39</sup> <sup>40</sup> the agency Pointsman worked for which houses enumerable paranormal cases (people with psychokinesis, or who can change their skin color at will, for example—an intriguing blend of Pavlovian experiments and supernatural séances), is slowly but surely hacked away at and subsumed by other, more immediately valuable operations.

Slothrop, meanwhile, becomes increasingly estranged from society. Wandering “the Zone,” the deterritorialized (both politically and, it seems, metaphysically) regions of Europe unoccupied by any nation’s military force, he adopts over the course of the novel eight different personas and increasingly forgets who he is. He does more and more drugs, wanders the countryside, and miraculously recovers the mouth harp he lost as a student at Harvard:

It is still possible, even this far out of it, to find and make audible the spirits of lost harpmen. Whacking the water out of his harmonica, reeds signing against his leg, picking up the single blues at bar 1 of this morning’s segment, Slothrop, just suckin’ away at his harp, is closer to being a spiritual medium than he’s been yet, and he doesn’t even know it. (634).

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<sup>38</sup> This will be important in the following section, in which the reterritorialization of the postwar landscape is discussed.

<sup>39</sup> Which, it should be said, rests in an old English abbey called “The White Visitation.” The building is eclectic to say the least: already sacked by Henry VIII (74), the inside of the building is filled with poorly-kept frescos of Baron Clive trampling Indian armed forces beneath elephants, the ceilings depict “Methodist versions of Christ’s kingdom” in which lions cuddle with lambs and fruit abounds, gargoyles cling to collapsing balconies—decadent only approaches the interior (84). Yet much of the building has been repurposed with radio equipment, antennas, landlines, guard dogs, and so on. Early in the novel the purpose of the organization is unclear, though Pynchon gives us perhaps the clearest overarching explanation: “Was Our Side seeking to demoralize the German Beast by broadcasting to him random thoughts of the mad, naming for him, also in the tradition of Constable Struggles that famous day, the deep, the scarcely seen? The answer is yes, all of the above, and more” (Pynchon 75). This repurposing of the old and desecrated for the endless needs of modernity offers good analogy for the secularization which Weber describes—a repurposed landscape Pynchon reenchants using its own nonsecular history.

<sup>40</sup> The first section of the novel also falls under the zodiac sign of Pisces, a time of death and removal, and might explain why PISCES is at its peak during this period before falling into ruin.

In pages of what could practically describe Walt Whitman's fantasies, Slothrop lets his hair grow, "likes to spend whole days naked, ants crawling up his legs, butterflies lighting his shoulders, watching the life on the mountain" (635), noticing one day "a very thick rainbow cock driven down out of the pubic clouds into Earth, green wet valleyed Earth, and his chest fills and he stands crying, not a thing in his head, just feeling natural..." (638).

Slothrop escapes the (now crumbling) bureaucracy which has haunted him since childhood by returning to nature and accepting the sacred which finds him there, which helps him feel natural. He discovers he loves trees, and laments that his ancestors killed them to make toilet paper (562). For Slothrop, the War, we are told, was his laboratory (50), and he himself is reduced in the logic of the system to mere statistics:

All in his life of what has looked free or random, is discovered to've been under some Control, all the time, the same as a fixed roulette wheel—where only destinations are important, attention is to long-term statistics, not individuals: and where the House always does, of course, keep turning a profit... (212)

The institutional forces which kept him under surveillance controlled the trajectory of his life until he was able to escape them; but the forces *above* that of the bureaucratic, which the highest-in-charge are seen consistently turning to for guidance, are escaped as well.

In a curious scene early on in the novel, we learn a bit about the market and its logic of control:

A market needed no longer be run by the Invisible Hand, but now could *create itself*—its own logic, momentum, style, from *inside*. Putting the control inside was ratifying what de facto had happened—that you had dispensed with God. But you had taken on a greater, and more harmful, illusion. The illusion of control. (31)

The market, the economic superstructure, for Pynchon, has become God itself. Needing no one to run it, the great white face of Rationalism has determined the narrative trajectories of those living under it. Those who would see themselves in control—the political leaders, CEO's and intelligence

officers—are working under an allusion of control which the market offers instead; and this is all a system, it can be argued, which Slothrop seems to have escaped through his embrace of the spiritual.

And yet, this information is related to us by a ghost in a séance, spoken through one Carol Eventyr, who gained his supernatural abilities encountering “Basher St. Blaise’s angel” while on a bombing run in Germany, which was “miles beyond designating, rising over Lübeck that Palm Sunday” (153). Even within the secular bureaucracy, leaders rely upon methods of magic and divination for information. In an analepsis later in the novel we encounter another séance, this time with a different medium. Set between the World Wars, Nazi leaders are attempting to contact the late Walter Rathenau, the historical foreign minister for the Weimar Republic after WWI, for guidance regarding the corporatization (or rather, “cartelization”) of Germany. He tells them something similar:

You think you’d have rather hear about what you call ‘life’: the growing, organic Kartell. But it’s only another illusion. A very clever robot. The more dynamic it seems to you, the more deep and dead, in reality, it grows... Death converted into more death. (169).

The “Kartell,” the business operation which shape Germany not only after the War but, as we learn, going *into* the war, is a social system of bureaucracy and death. Bureaucracy is “Death’s antechamber” (40). We hardly see this occur—in a strategic method by Pynchon, the corporate world becomes increasingly invisible as the novel progresses. As Guy Debord says in *Society of the Spectacle*:

The ruling totalitarian-ideological class is the ruler of a world turned upside down. The more powerful the class, the more it claims not to exist, and its power is employed above all to enforce this claim. It is modest only on this one point, however, because this officially nonexistent bureaucracy simultaneously attributes the crowning achievements of history to its own infallible leadership. Though its existence is everywhere in evidence, the bureaucracy must be invisible as a class. As a result, all social life becomes insane. (106)

This is precisely the image Pynchon paints as the novel progresses. IG Farben, Imopolex, GE, Shell—after spending a bit of time sending agents after Slothrop, who gains more and more

knowledge of the “Kartell,” they then (alarmingly) disappear from the story. The reterritorialization of the zone is a silent one, already planned before the War began. Yet, if there is one way Pynchon disturbs Debord’s postmodern theory of the ruling class, it’s to point out the unjust self-congratulatory nature of the ruling class in the face of their own spiritual guidance. Even if the Nazis are relying upon the ghost of “Herr Rathenau” to inform their economic decisions, they’re quick to dismiss the sacred nature of such otherworldly contact (and thus, the séance ends with one Nazi jokingly asking, “Is God really Jewish?” (170)—the chapter ends before we can hear the crowd’s laughter). Herman and Weisenburger note that this attitude is a continuation of the project of these elite crowds—these corporate and military elite would not be gathered so eagerly around séance tables if the colonization and routinization of the “Free Zone,” the Other side, wasn’t available (166).

There is another force of mixed spirituality amidst the novel’s Zone, however, that is not so quick to dismiss. The Schwarzkommando, Herero peoples brought from Southern Africa by the German colonial forces and trained in the ways of the rocket, play perhaps the most significant role in the latter part of the novel. They watch the “creeping cartels” take a hold of the Zone (527) as they separate themselves from the Nazi’s to undertake their own spiritual journey. They offer a rich and syncretic blend of Teutonic myth (offered by the novel’s antagonist, the Nazi launch officer Blicero) and Herero spiritual tradition which undergirds a kind of “Rocket state-cosmology,” where the two mythologies “converge in a contemporary, technological mythology of rockets” (*Companion* 185), one which opposes the various “heretics” of the Rocket:

Gnostics who have been taken in a rush of wind and fire to chambers of the Rocket-throne... Kabbalists who study the Rocket as Torah... Manichaeans who see two Rockets, good and evil... a good Rocket to take us to the stars, an evil Rocket for the World’s suicide. (741)

Thus, the “Bodenplatte,” the steel plate from which the rockets launch, is a mandala, and scratched into the trees around the launch sites is the Latin “IN HOC SIGNO VINCES”—“in this sign you’ll



conquer” (the symbol of the mandala) (102). The Zone Hereros are, it seems, victorious by the end of the novel. Able to construct the final A4 rocket from scraps salvaged in the Zone—the quest which their leader sees as the one endless diversion from their own tribal suicide<sup>41</sup>—the legendary “00001,” it is presumably launched in a final sacred ritual which concludes the spiritual journey of the Schwarzkommando.<sup>42</sup> Though the faith they carry is syncretic and undeniably associated with modernity, technology, and colonial history, their victory points to at least a local victory against the secular state.

I’ll conclude with an analysis of a scene in the novel’s first section, and one of the most moving of the entire work, in which Roger Mexico and his girlfriend, Jessica, attend an Advent service (the sixth Advent of the War) in an Anglican church. If Pynchon provides an allegorical argument for postsecular resacralization, *Gravity’s Rainbow* offers no better example:

Both Roger and Jessica are secular characters from the start—Jessica remains religiously ambiguous (though the scene recollects her perhaps religious upbringing), her life caught up largely in her affair with Roger; and Roger himself is a devout follower of statistics and his Poisson equations. Yet, when they watch the “men in greatcoats, in oilskins, in dark berets” enter the church, Roger wonders if they can’t “pop in here just for a moment.” Jessica tells Roger that he’s not supposed to be the sort to go to church, to which the narrator responds with a cascade of imagery suggesting Jessica’s nostalgia, memories of boys singing carols for sixpences, hedges snowy as sheep (““Oh, I remember...’,” she says, “but didn't go on”), and suddenly we’re there at the threshold of the church with them, “To hear the music,” Roger explains (130).

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<sup>41</sup> This endless diversion of suicide will be an important theme later on, as it finds parallel with the endless diversion commodities provide.

<sup>42</sup> Where the 00001 *goes*, however, will be discussed later.

Inside the church, “the intricate needs of the Anglo-American Empire (1939-1945)” have dragged a Jamaican countertenor out of “palmy Kingston” and into “this cold fieldmouse church” amidst an all male scratch choir. Pynchon describes the countertenor’s home, singing his childhood in High Holborn street, listening to American pop songs about love, “come walking out with high-skirted girls, girls of the island, Chinese and French girls...each morning he counted out half a pocket full of coins of all nations.” Yet here he is in London during the War, singing carols in Latin and German (“...*German?* in an English church?”):

With the high voice of the black man riding above the others...he was bringing brown girls to sashay among these nervous Protestants, down the ancient paths the music had set, Big and Little Anita, Stiletto May, Plongette who loves it between her tits and will do it that way for free... These are not heresies so much as imperial outcomes, necessary as the black man’s presence, from acts of minor surrealism—which, taken in the mass, are an act of suicide, but which in its pathology, in its dreamless version of the real, the Empire commits by the thousands every day, completely unaware of what it’s doing... So the pure countertenor voice was souring, finding its way in to buoy Jessica’s heart and even Roger’s she guessed... (131-132)

There is an obvious push here for an emphatically globalist reading of Pynchon (the whole book offers itself easily to this mode of interpretation); but perhaps more acutely is one which emphasizes the ways Pynchon welds together the complexities of the global economic war machine with the spiritual.

For Pynchon, the secular and religious are equally mystifying—a manifestation of the troubling secular/religious dichotomy—and so it becomes easy to weave the two together to suggest that the sacred experience paradoxically embodies both and yet is divorced from either, is neither completely secular nor charted by any specific religious doctrine. The secular is repeatedly *détourned* to invoke the sacred. This song, then, is the “War’s evensong” (132), brought to us by London’s preterite. Spam tins and toothpaste tubes have been melted down, “reincarnated” into war supplies and nativity scenes which for the kids now “are turning real again,” (135), and the usual gifts to the baby Jesus are replaced by gifts to the serai “of tungsten, cordite, high-octane” (133). The effect of

this service on the two lovers is significant, and we are told that “Jessica’s never seen [Roger’s] face exactly like this... skin more child-pink, his eyes more glowing than the lamplight alone can account for” (132).

Stylistically, the subchapter unfolds in a stream-of-consciousness cascade of temporal and conceptual juxtaposition and discursivity. We move through scenes of female military personnel repurposing equipment on the frozen beaches to “The White Visitation,” where a schizophrenic who is the war, who will die on V-E Day and suffered an extreme fever during the Normandy invasion, perks up during the Rundstedt offensive (“A beautiful Christmas gift,” he confesses (133)). Strung throughout the imagery is the narrator’s own essay on the War, the War as living, breathing thing, here not only to bring us into this Advent service but to remind us, perhaps, that in this undeniably enchanted world the symbols that comprise it should be approached hermeneutically regardless of their truth, that if we are to reach deep into the past and drag out its imagery “truth” becomes more or less irrelevant to the sacred. “Is the baby smiling,” we are asked of Christ, “or is it just gas? Which do you want it to be?” (133).

One way of approaching this stylistic decision is to see this subchapter as Pynchon dragging us, the readers, into this church with Roger and Jessica. The sentences and images which flow through the pages perhaps mimic the characters’ own thoughts through the service, guided by the counter-tenor of the Jamaican, through the landscape of the War. We are offered no choice but to stand amidst the “greatcoats” and “empty hoods” and offer our own silent voices into the War’s frozen night. The scene exemplifies how Pynchon imagines the sacred finding the characters themselves; after all, postsecular characters are, as McClure tells us, “souls without faith who cannot seek.” Though Roger and Jessica are compelled to enter the advent service for reasons that include nostalgia and “simple refreshment” (ultimately fetishistic reasons) they end up encountering something much more powerful (McClure 61)—in this case, a true experience of the sacred, born

out of the seamless blending of the secular complexities of the “Empire” and the atemporality of its sublimity. And as we, secular readers of Pynchon, approach the novel with the secular-surgical tools ready to dissect its enumerable intricacies and quirks (perhaps for fetishistic reasons ourselves—*Gravity’s Rainbow* certainly has plenty scenes to choose from), we have instead found ourselves in church, where “exiles and horny kids” and “men suffering from acute lower backs and all-day hangovers” have gathered,

give you this evensong, climaxing now with its rising fragment of some ancient scale, voices overlapping three- and fourfold, up, echoing, filling the entire hollow of the church—no counterfeit baby, no announcement of the Kingdom, not even a try at warming or lighting this terrible night, only, damn us, our scruffy obligatory little cry, our maximum reach outward—*praise be to God!*—for you to take back to your war address, your war-identity, across the snow’s footprints and tire tracks finally to the path you must create by yourself, alone in the dark. (138/139)

What I hope to have illuminated is the extraordinary degree to which Pynchon permeates his universe in inextricable ways with the sacred. Thus, the infamous quote in the novel’s opening: “No, this is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive *knotting into*” (1-2). There is a certain sense to which the obsessive cataloguing of incredibly intricate political and economic plots is presented as an explanation for such a surreal world; and yet, at all levels, Pynchon seems to pervert our understandings of what is secular about these plots—the plots, it seems, are there to distract us from the powers that be, for us as much as for Slothrop. Thus, the persistent recurrence of the mandala—amongst other spiritual imagery—as the grounding for the Rocket (102); the combined symbol of Slothrop’s ‘X’s for sexual escapades and Mexico’s ‘O’s for A4 strike location, when overlapped; the unwitting symbol of “Rocketman” (one of Slothrop’s personas), which he discovers is also the shape of the A4, seen from below, by which time he had “become tuned” to the mandala’s recurrence everywhere else (637). We begin to see, as Slothrop does, the “wind gods, hilltop gods, sunset gods” (735), which reenchant the landscape for us. One character, we are told, has “had to fight to believe

in his mortality,” to be able to tell his friend that “there is no life after death” (718)—it’s simply a difficult thing to do in the world of *Gravity’s Rainbow*.

### *High and Low Epistemologies and the Reterritorialization of the Zone*

All the baggy-pants outfielders, doughboys in khaki, cancan girls now sedate, bathing beauties even more so, cowboys and cigar-store Indians, google-eyed Negroes, apple-cart urchins, lounge lizards and movie queens, cardsharps, clowns, crosseyed lamppost drunks, flying aces, motorboat captains, white hunters on safari and Negroid apes, fat men, chefs in chefs’ hats, Jewish usurers, XXX jug-clutching hillbillies, comic-book cats dogs and mice, prizefighters and mountaineers, radio stars, midgets, ten-in-one freaks, railroad hobos, marathon dancers, swing bands, high-society partygoers, racehorses and jockeys, taxidancers, Indianapolis drivers, sailors ashore and wahines in hula skirts, sinewed Olympic runners, tycoons holding big round bags with dollar signs...

Don’t forget the real business of war is buying and selling. The murdering and violence are self-policing, and can be entrusted to non-professionals. The mass nature of wartime death is useful in many ways. It serves as spectacle, as diversion from the real movements of the War. It provides raw material to be recorded into History, so that children may be taught History as sequences of violences, battle after battle, and be more prepared for the adult world. The true war is a celebration of markets.<sup>43</sup>

Attempting to catalogue the degree to which Pynchon permeates the sublimity of the contemporary economic superstructure with instances of the supernatural would be a tiresome and pointless endeavor—suffice it to say it never ends. What is evident, however, by his mixing of scientific and empirical discourses with the supernatural, a rationalism that is fundamentally grounded upon a syncretic blend of spiritual traditions (a syncretism which is undeniably political in its aesthetic), is that he seeks to destabilize the dichotomy between the ‘Real’ and the spiritual. Yet, this is not so isolated an act as theorists like McClure see it. Pynchon’s destabilization of the Real, his rich cacophony of religious and scientific terminology, his ontological playfulness and supernatural

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<sup>43</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*.

ambiguity, all offer what I see as a fundamental apophysis—or, as the narrator of the novel refers to it, “anti-paranoia,” a state which lacks what’s “comforting” and “religious” about paranoia, and “where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long” (434). I’d like to now demonstrate the degree to which Pynchon inflects the epistemology and logic of his own narrative with those of postmodern mass culture, destabilizing the validity of its own spiritualities.

Thematically, Pynchon launches a full-on assault against the regime of Reason in the form of spiritual penetration; and yet it seems most clear to me that he does so, among other reasons, to properly project the superstructure of postmodern capitalism itself, which endlessly dodges direct inspection. Pynchon’s world—and Pynchon’s rewritten history of it—is exuberant, filled with quirky pastiche of comic books and sitcoms and monster flicks from the ‘50s and ‘60s and chapters’ worth of hallucinatory experiences. The entire novel, at least its latter parts, seem entirely undergirded by the logic of this kind of culture, a stylistic move which captures the commodity culture of his and our time, in which an infinite host of depthless and ‘low’ commodities seek to make banal and commodifiable the entirety of the world. As Herman and Weisenburger note in *Gravity’s Rainbow, Domination and Freedom*, Pynchon repeatedly projects to us pulp images of new, anxiety-inducing science being squashed by the forces of good and benignly science. The ideological message: “Not to worry, people! Good science will always trump evil science.” They continue:

Our novelist will have, perhaps exorcise, our unconscious nightmare for us—if we wish. So this multifaceted trope—comical, critical, metafictional—not only signals to readers still in the novel’s foyer that they will at times need to set aside expectations for a storytelling art working in strict obedience to the conventions of fictional realism...It also puts at stake one’s willingness to cede control of (a part of) one’s mind to another. (7)

Herman and Weisenburger frame this on the context of the reader ceding their own freedom to the subjective trip of Pynchon’s narrative; but the phrase “unconscious nightmare” might be a good way to describe this comic book world. The reader of *Gravity’s Rainbow* will certainly, I hope, laugh quite often at the novel’s quirks, but the desire to reach into the depths of the narrative (in a very

hermeneutic manner) and grab the sacred in it (as exemplified by the enormous literature surrounding Pynchon) is testament to what we find valuable in the novel which Pynchon buries under a “heap of fragments,” as Jameson says—if all we wanted was surface, we’d just read the comic books themselves.

The theme of mass culture which persists throughout *Gravity’s Rainbow* points to a clear criticism of the distraction such culture provides. Characters have desires; but these desires are subverted and provided for before they can be satisfied properly by the characters themselves:

In Pynchon’s storyworld the task of inculcating such desires goes to modern mass media—print, radio, and cinema. Their work is to make repression bearable, to present the simulacra of a tolerant, egalitarian society of free or even, when called to it, heroically free individuals, despite how alternate facts define a social order wholly committed to sustaining and spreading existing hierarchy and domination. Media *seems* to reify people’s fantasies while merely peddling “mindless pleasures,” the novel’s working title as it went into production at Viking in late 1972. (Herman and Weisenburger 5)

As the novel progresses, we get increasingly many of these media references, increasingly racist 1950s skits of “Takeshi and Ichizo, The Komical Kamikazes” (704), for example. Trapped in an ultimately commodified world, citizens of corporatized nations (who feel more dead than the actual spirits we encounter) are enslaved to the markets, and in a perverse way begin to desire it themselves.

Consider the curious story of Byron the Bulb. Byron, a lightbulb, whose *Seele* (soul, and the German for filament) in “Bulb Baby Heaven” was one of an anarchist revolutionary (660). He develops, in the manufacturing plant, schemes to overthrow human oppression. He plans to organize all bulbs to shut on and off “at a rate close to the human brain’s alpha rhythm,” so as to trigger a massive European-wide epileptic fit, leaving “humans thrashing around the 20 millions rooms like fish on the beaches of Perfect Energy.” Then, a few millions bulbs will explode, kamikaze-style, to let them know Byron’s “Guerilla Strike Force” really means business (662).

“Is Byron in for a rude awakening!” Upon entering the actual world, he discovers the organization known as “Phoebus,” which is “the international light-bulb cartel” run by International GE, Osram, and Associated Electrical Industries of Britain (yes, Britain, for a German subsidiary). Phoebus is in charge of allocating raw bulb materials and setting their market prices, such as tungsten, as well as sets the operational life spans of the bulbs for their constant replacement—an “ideally regulated market, if totally unfree” for our little Byron here (*Domination and Freedom* 9).

What we, Phoebus, and Byron eventually learn, however, is that “Byron is immortal” (662). Byron learns about the transience of other bulbs, which makes his love for them “easier, and also more intense—to love as if each design-hour will be the last.” This is a problem for the cartel, which hires agents from the Committee on Incandescent Anomalies (one of several CIA agencies in the novel) to come and take Byron away. Byron, in fact, wouldn’t mind being melted down, salvaged for his tungsten and admitted into the “structureless pool of glass” he’s been watching over. Unfortunately for Byron, however, “he is trapped on the Karmic wheel” (664). He is miraculously saved from capture over and over again, traded to a prostitute for morphine here, screwed into someone’s asshole there, eventually flushed down a toilet into the North Sea. He is condemned to a life of reuse: “He will be screwed into mother (*Mutter*) after mother, as the female threads of German light-bulb sockets are known, for some reason that escapes everybody” (666).

As this process continues, Byron becomes increasingly aware of the scope of cartelization he is being screwed into, and how impossible his dreams of upsetting it were. Byron becomes a legend, but at the same time a failed hero. “Someday he will know everything,” we are told, “and still be as impotent as before:”

His youthful dreams of organizing all the bulbs in the world seem impossible now—the Grid is wide open, all messages can be overheard, and there are more than enough traitors out on the line. Prophets traditionally don’t last long—they are either killed outright, or given an accident serious enough to make them stop and think, and most often they do pull back. But on Byron has been visited an even better fate. He is condemned to go on forever, knowing the truth and powerless to change



anything. No longer will he seek to get off the wheel. His anger and frustration will grow without limit, and he will find himself, poor perverse bulb, enjoying it. (668)

Herman and Weisenburger call this Byron's "final irony" (9), and this irony has led Harold Bloom to dub this "the saddest paragraph in all of Pynchon," going on to say that "In it is Pynchon's despair for his own Gnostic Kabbalah, since Byron the Bulb does achieve the Gnosis, complete knowledge, but purchases that knowledge by impotence... Byron can neither be martyred, nor betray his own prophetic vocation" (8).

Thus ends the off-the-wall tale of Byron the Bulb. On the one hand, Pynchon uses this obscene detour to project the processes of cartelization already described. As impotent as Slothrop, Byron's flush down the toilet eerily imitates several Slothropian tropes (during a drug-induced interrogation early in the novel, for example, Slothrop chases his lost harmonica down a toilet in Massachusetts and is flushed into a kind of heaven, where he meets the "Kenosha Kid"). Herman and Weisenburger draw another interesting parallel. Byron's tale divides a narration in which we view a "Colonel from Kenosha" being shaved by one Eddie Pensiero (Byron supposedly illuminates this scene, attached to a hand-crank generator used by another soldier—finally off the grid). The Colonel sits with his head thrown back, "his throat is open to the pain-radiance of the Bulb" but also to Eddie, who's feeling the "mortal blues" tonight (668). We're left with Eddie, "holding his scissors in a way barbers aren't supposed to" and the Colonel, "with a last tilt of his head, exposes his jugular, clearly impatient with the—" (669).

And the episode suddenly concludes—"with an em dash, as if the film has broken, the projector jammed, just as we anticipate the climax" (*Domination and Freedom* 11). We aren't given the conclusion, told whether or not Byron is successfully beginning his original revolutionary schemes, synced to the brainwaves of Eddie to commit the bloody act, finally free from the Grid.

The end of *Gravity's Rainbow*, titled "Descent," follows the downward plunge of Blicero's "00000," the final and legendary Nazi A4, into which is strapped the Herero Gottfried. Pynchon

invites us into a sing-along (“follow the bouncing ball”), which ends with the narrator exclaiming, “Now everybody—” (776). The novel ends on another em dash. Yet the location of the strike is a theatre in Los Angeles, where both Richard Nixon (and we) are in attendance. “Descent,” Herman and Weisenburger tell us, “reprises that narrative figure of stopping... the ‘film has broken’ (or a projector bulb has burned out), leaving a ‘bright angel of death’—a rocket—poised (like those scissors) right above our theatre, circa 1972, and we’re invited to join a sing-along, which is once more broken off by an em dash” (11).

Having achieved sacred knowledge and yet impotent with it, Byron’s story is synecdochically related to Slothrop’s (who, as it turns out, is no hero himself, spiritual or otherwise), which is related to ours as well. Just as Byron is doomed to go on forever, generating a resentment he learns pathologically to relish, scuffling Slothrop is doomed to revolutionary impotence; but we, the readers, fall into this same category, singing songs (once hymnal and holy) to hold us over until the rocket (the project of force and sadomasochistic domination) strikes us (perhaps, as Pointsman mused, at the top of head, not unlike being smited by God). But this is a fate the em dash forever postpones. In another singalong much earlier in the novel, titled “Sold on Suicide,” we’re told it’s one that goes on forever. Apparently, “by Gödel’s Theorem there is bound to be some item around that one has omitted from the list” of reasons to kill oneself (325), and so our suicide is postponed indefinitely. Herman and Weisenburger equate this passage to the divination process, which is itself endlessly recursive: clients of divination “must look back, evaluate a prophecy’s utility—gauge how efficaciously it enabled them to confront change—then adjust their prospects by scheduling another reading with the diviner” (156).<sup>44</sup> What I’d like to suggest here is that this suicide-forever-postponed

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<sup>44</sup> There is a strong parallel here as well to Žižek’s “messianic longing for the democracy to come” which he describes in *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*, and this is certainly no coincidence. The notion of totality forever to come, whether it be the destruction of one’s existence (suicide) or a utopia which by definition would have no need for history (the democracy here described, or something akin to Kant’s “kingdom of ends,” etc.) is indefinitely postponed by the same force: the erasure of history and the ability to think historically *prior* to the coming totality, forever stranding us within the present.

strongly reflects the very nature of the commodity world, in which products are presented at a pace fast enough to exclude the possibility for reflection. Pynchon's scenes, especially as they accelerate (rocketlike) towards the novel's end, operate much like television—before we know it, we're hurling towards the novel's conclusion without the ability to place these scenes in any chronological order or narrative structure. Consumption becomes an end in itself in the cartelized Zone, and it's all we have time for anyway as we hurl towards not only the end of the narrative (and the end of *narrative* itself, as it fragments) but to some kind of end of history as well.

So Byron's story reflects the nature of cartelization. But, as I said, this is just the one hand. Byron's tale also points to an even more sinister conclusion: that the cartelization of the Zone colonizes the narrative and the novel's epistemology as well. There is a general theme in the novel in which various motifs parallel the cartelization of the Zone. The war, it seems, had opened up the Zone to a kind of freedom for its inhabitants. Squalidozzi, an Argentinian revolutionary Slothrop meets in Zurich, articulates this "opening-up" of the Zone. "In ordinary times," he tells him,

the center always wins. Its power grows with time, and that can't be reversed, not by ordinary means, Decentralizing, back toward anarchism, needs extraordinary times...this War—this incredible War—just for the moment has wiped out the proliferation of little states that's prevailed in Germany for a thousand years. Wiped it clean. *Opened it.* (268)

He describes how, in Argentina, the land was open and free for whoever sought to use it. But then Buenos Aires sought to establish greater control over the land—"Fences went up, and the gaucho became less free." Now that the war has opened up Germany to a smoother surface, in which something like the State more or less doesn't exist, Squalidozzi and his Argentinian anarchists see an opportunity to restore that anarchistic utopia of pre-modern Argentina. As another characters tells Slothrop later on, "It's all been suspended. Vaslav calls it an 'interregnum.' You only have to flow along with it" (298).

Well, flow along with it he does. This time of an open Zone, the early parts of the novel, happens to be when a postsecular reading of the novel is the easiest. The scene of Roger and Jessica in church, for instance, occurs in part one, a time when a reaching-back into spiritual traditions (mostly Christian) seems to provide ample support against the terrible reality of the Rocket. Part two—which falls under the sign of Aries, “a sign of strong personal identity,” Weisenburger tells us—is ironically the time when Slothrop *loses* his identity (*Companion* 123). It is at this point, which continues through part three, that Slothrop gathers more and more identities (such as the legendary “Rocketman,” or at one point the mythical “Plechazunga the Pig”) and develops more and more knowledge about the cartel, all the while being inducted into his own syncretic spirituality. But, as Weisenburger tells us about part three, it projects a “new state of late modernity” which “assumes authority over the rubble and the land of its peoples” (177).

The cataclysm of the War, the precarity of the power structures during this war period, is a time when the fabric of the spectacle begins to loosen, like holes in the burlap sack over the heads of not only McClure’s pilgrims but dreamers of any kind—just one example being Squalidozzi. These holes reveal not only political opportunity, but also divergent spiritual roads from the greater secular trend. But, as Herman and Weisenburger say, even though

War has geographically and politically disrupted and redrawn the maps of European nations... it has left global corporations intact, capitalized and government-supported as never before, especially the booming U.S. corporations—unscathed by battle and uniquely blessed with legal personhood. (10)

In one sense, then, Slothrop develops a special kind of knowledge in this section, becoming both more aware of the corporate cartel as well as the mysteries of the nature and the spirits which inhabit it; and yet, he is being dragged by a force he cannot control all the way down, down into a fragmentation which is hardly heroic. Perhaps he was meant to enter the Zone to build himself in it, but he is “broken down instead, scattered” (752); an albatross, “plucked, hell—*stripped*. Scattered all over the Zone. It’s doubtful if he can ever be “found” again” (726). The part also contains thirty-

two episodes, which Weisenburger notes is both the gravitational pull of the Earth in feet-per-second, as well as the number associated with the acquisition of knowledge in Kabbalistic mythology. As it would seem, the syncretism of the book's middle sections hasn't worked. Everyone seems to be hurling towards a fragmentation and unfreedom at the same feet-per-second as the Rocket, equally out of their own control.

Deleuze and Guattari, in *Nomadology: The War Machine*, deconstruct the concepts of the State and the war machine to show that the two are in hostile relation to each other. The war machine, they argue, was appropriated by the State to defend its institution of force; and yet, this appropriated war machine has outgrown the state, such that "the States are now no more than objects or means adapted to that machine:"

This world wide war machine, which in a way "reissues" from the States, displays two successive figures: first, that of fascism, which makes war an unlimited movement with no other aim than itself; but fascism is only a rough sketch, and the second, post fascist, figure is that of a war machine that takes peace as its object directly, as the peace of Terror or Survival. The war machine reforms a smooth space that now claims to control, to surround the entire earth. Total war itself is surpassed, toward a form of peace more terrifying still. (100)

Pynchon carefully manages to avoid the actual War as it's fought, and what he does instead is imagine the war machine itself, in its global form, as it devours fascism to produce an even more horrifying peace. What is crucial about the war machine is that its relationship to war itself is variable; and war itself has a variable relation to combat. The majority of the violence of the State appropriated war machine need not be done on the battlefield, and "we have seen it assign," we are told, "as its objective a peace still more terrifying than fascist death" (101). Thus, "in this latest War," a character tells us, "death was no enemy, but a collaborator... the real and only fucking is done on paper" (627).

The cartelization of the Zone, its movement from decimation to post-War *postmodernization*, is provided to us in the form the commodification of the very novel's narrative trajectories;

trajectories which, like “a host of other souls,” are feeling themselves, “even now, Rocketlike, driving out toward the stone-blue lights of the Vacuum under a Control they cannot quite name” (242). Well, for us, that Control is postmodernity, the ultimate step in the ‘Rationalization’ of society, in which, as Jameson notes, even our subconscious has been colonized by the logic of commodities. And, just like Byron, now that we’re strapped to the “Karmic wheel” of such a Vacuum as commodity culture, hurling Rocketlike into a future we can hardly imagine, contained entirely in an em dash, we find ourselves, my God, enjoying it too.

Pynchon’s use of low culture, on some level, is always sarcastic—it’s offered as an example of depthlessness. What critics like McClure forget, however, is that Pynchon doesn’t seem to offer much alternative to this depthlessness. Low culture is presented on the same epistemological level as any other aspect of the novel, demonstrating that what we consume of the spiritual here is simply the banal and commodified *image* of the spiritual. As Josephine Hendin says, Pynchon “tells you how this culture turns life into plastic shit” (Bloom 42). But this is the epistemological conclusion, not the initial dilemma from which spiritual plurality is offered as the possible solution. Even the leftover parts of the A4, that sacred object for Blicero and the Hereros, is commodified and turned into trinkets, keychains for back home (300). The recurrence of the mandala, for example, prods us to hermeneutically unpack the sacred image; but the very fact of its presence, the appropriated image that operates both as the utopic emblem for ‘60s free-love counter-culture (explored in greater depth in Pynchon’s *Vineland*) and as the basis for the Nazi swastika (itself already “broken down by the early Christians, to disguise their outlaw symbol” (102)), prompts us to think critically what exactly is “deep” about this image to us. Pynchon would not let us think historically about this image—it always appears to us contaminated by its contemporary context; or rather, by moving toward a genealogy of these religious symbols we can begin to understand them as a blend of pastiche and historical deafness. We may feel ourselves on the brink of spiritual transcendence, but in this world

even the witches, we're told, are starting more and more to have "a bureaucratic career in mind" (733). As one character wonders, "where are the great Shears from the sky that will readjust Happyville?" (668). Where's Eddie with the scissors faster than sound? Perhaps forever postponed in an em dash. And perhaps the novel's spiritual inflection points to some hideouts of sacred, such that the State, it is shown, can never fully win; but even so, it most certainly can never lose. "All in his life," Slothrop tragically realizes,

of what has looked free or random, is discovered to've been under some Control, all the time, the same as a fixed roulette wheel—where only destinations are important, attention is to long-term statistics, not individuals: and where the House always does, of course, keep turning a profit... (212)

### *Preterition of the Precariat*

Doubtless, the present situation is highly discouraging.<sup>45</sup>

Will we have to stop watching the sky?<sup>46</sup>

So: it becomes very clear upon reading any section of *Gravity's Rainbow* that the novel is "penetrated," to use McClure's word, with the sacred, offering an endless exhibition of ontological playfulness which dramatically upsets secular understandings of the world. At the same time, however, commodity culture seems to undergird the logic of the novel, both in content and style. Religious imagery, symbolism, and reflection certainly do appear; but this is either after the fact, bound up inextricably with postmodern culture; or, as I see it, preceding the cartelization which inevitably colonizes such attempts at sacred depth.

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<sup>45</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Nomadology*.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*.

Squalidozzi's dreams, for example, like Byron's, are realized as fairly hopeless. In a final attempt at this "anarchist experiment," Squalidozzi and others move into an abandoned town in Italy ("one-time company towns" that have been taken over by war dogs, their handlers now dead) to make a revolutionary film. They stage the town with real "sheep, cattle, horses, and corrals," real huts and storefronts (624), for authenticity even though the group consists of a dozen nationalities (not authentic, Argentinian anarchists). But we already know that this proto-spaghetti Western is doomed for failure. In fact, we had already learned about their film's sequel (*The Return of Martín Fierro*), "in which the gaucho sells out: assimilates back into Christian society, gives up his freedom for the kind of constitutional Gesellschaft being pushed in those days by Buenos Aires" (393). It's a last-ditch effort to invoke revolutionary ideals in a market which makes such ideals banal, and we can expect it at best to make it big in the box office. This is a theme Pynchon uses quite often. As Herman and Weisenburger tell us, "*Gravity's Rainbow* and *Vineland* present characters romancing the idea of revolution but failing to carry it through" (215).<sup>47</sup>

At one point in the novel, Slothrop boards a ship called the *Anubis*, on which are Germany's elite, floating on an endless trip of vice as they float harmlessly out of Germany during its collapse. One such partygoer, Thanatz—who helped Blicero in the launch of the "00000," or "Schwarzgerät"—is washed overboard in the same storm Slothrop is. We're told that the *Anubis* is headed "to salvation," and that "back here, in her wake, are the preterite, swimming and drowning, mired and afoot, poor passengers at sundown who've lost the way, blundering across one another's

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<sup>47</sup> As stated, the 00001 A4 which the Schwarzkommando launch at the end of *Gravity's Rainbow* lands in a theatre in L.A. circa 1970—in which we and Nixon are in attendance. This might be seen as a final heroic movement, the Zone Hereros able to complete their spiritual quest and launch a rocket straight into the productive heart of commodity culture (Hollywood) and the State (Nixon). However, Pynchon's following novel, *Vineland*, takes place on the Californian coast in 1984, and imagines Ronald Reagan's war on drugs as leftover hippies are systematically hunted and displaced to make way for the development of the Californian coast. I'm not saying that this is *the* necessary connection to make; but it's an easy enough reading to imagine that the Herero's quest failed. This is further demonstrated by an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* and one of the Schwarzkommando at the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*, which supposedly takes place some time in the story's future (perhaps the early '70s). In it, the Schwarzkommando bitterly laments his own people's impotence (753-4).





Figure 2 U.S. launch of *Bumper V-2*, August 19, 1948. We learn in *Gravity's Rainbow* that as Germany falls, it becomes an easter egg hunt between the allied forces for V-2/A4 parts to be sent home, reconstructed, and fired. This is, Weisenburger notes, historically accurate.

flotsam, the dreary junking of memories... Men overboard and common debris" (680). Such is the Zone, the wake of the elite and elect, in which those doomed as preterite drown amidst each other. To be cast into the shadow of the superstructure is, for Pynchon, quite like being condemned God. And Thanatz sure has his work cut out for him, will need many "lessons in being preterite" (682) to survive out in the Zone. But even though Thanatz' preterition was determined by his slipping on the mess cook's vomit (681), there is no way to turn back the time; his fate is sealed as one condemned in at least this life.

In "Postmodern/Postsecular," McClure points to a part in Jameson's *Political Unconscious* that's "at odds" with Jameson's later analysis of the historical moment in *Postmodernism*. Jameson

argues that “in the context of the gradual reification of realism in late capitalism... romance once again comes to be felt as the place of narrative heterogeneity and of freedom from that reality principle to which a now oppressive realistic representation is the hostage.” “Romance,” he continues, “now again seems to offer the possibility of sensing other historical rhythms... a reconquest (but at what price?) of some feeling for a salvational future” (quoted in McClure 145). McClure sees this as an example of authors working around the pitfall into pastiche or depthlessness through “an assault on hegemonic discursive norms” which are “identified, at least etymologically, with spirituality.”

Well, *Gravity's Rainbow* provides quite the opposite romance narrative. Roger and Jessica's relationship, our only real romance narrative (Slothrop's evolves into a fairly constant stream of escapades with arguably-prepubescent girls) sublimates upon the Zone's cartelization, which I hope is obviously, at this point, analogous to postmodernization. “The day the rockets stopped falling,” we're told, “it began to end for Roger and Jessica” (641). Having been already married to one Jeremy Beaver, who's comfy job occupied him for most of the war (which allows Jessica to have her affair with Roger in the first place) the post-war scene begins to creep over her, like a bad and dusty Spring, and she succumbs to the allure of an easy suburban life. We're given premonitions of this when part one of the book ends and Roger foreshadows that Beaver (“Damned Beaver/Jeremy *is* the war”) will steal Jess when the war's over, like the Angel of Death itself, and ends with the line “Oh, Jess. Jessica. Don't leave me” (180). But we already know she's gone. Pynchon depicts postmodernity, which restructures space in its own image through urbanism, as even able to subvert romantic relationships by imposing the necessity of the urban romantic narrative.

In Herman and Weisenburger's conclusion, entitled “Too Late,” they wonderfully relate the overarching pessimism Pynchon transcribes the whole of his narrative in, which I may as well quote at length:

The final irony in *Gravity's Rainbow* is that for *all* the characters, it is simply too late. The narrator repeatedly says this about many of the novel's main preterite figures. Enzian is shown thinking to himself that for him and his exiled, trekking Hereros it is "too late, miles and changes too late;" and later we learn it's also "too late" for his brother, Tchitcherine—a good thing for Enzian, at least. Roger laments the irony in how the war's end means it is "too late" for his romance with Jessica. Frans van der Groov [sic], after months of wantonly shooting the dodoes in company with fellow Dutch colonialists, momentarily thinks of putting a stop to the extermination but decides the effort is so far along it is just "too late" for the remnant of the dodoes standing before him. So he blasts away. Gottfried, snuggled into the Rocket 00000 before launch, thinks of something he wanted to say to Weissmann, but now it's "too late." And about Slothrop's persistent nostalgia for Massachusetts, the narrator says it's "too late to go home." (216)

Unfortunately, that's not all. The novel's 19 word opening—"A screaming comes across the sky. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now"—is followed immediately by the line "It is too late," as though the entire novel, from its outset, the first tentative steps into its intimidating foyer, is an exercise in the narrative production of Preterite survival. But this introduction, Herman and Weisenburger note, troublingly "democratizes the impending doom," erasing the elect/preterite distinction (217); perhaps because there is no elect in the new cartelized/postmodern world, no redemption for "Pynchon's Nixon caricature right on down to the novel's lowliest souls" (216). Being elect, it seems, depends largely on chance; we can perhaps anticipate a sinking *Anubis*.

And still it doesn't end—at the novel's conclusion, as the narrative begins to fragment and break down into an exhibition of postmodern culture, we find (in a scene called "Chase Music") that even our fictional heroes are too late. "Sir Denis Nayland Smith" of the *Fu Manchu* novels "*will* arrive, my God, too late," defeated by his "Yellow Adversary;" "Superman will swoop boots-first into a deserted clearing," just missing the V2 launch, where the "curls on his head begin to show their first threads of gray;" "Philip Marlowe" will be delayed by a horrible migraine, "and reach by reflex for the pint of rye in his suit pocket;" "Submariner" of the comic books "will run into battery trouble;" "Plasticman," Slothrop's preferred comic book hero, "will lose his way among the

Imipolex chains” (the plastic invented by Nazi scientist, in which Gottfried is wrapped in the 00000); “The Lone Ranger will storm in... to find his young friend, innocent Dan, swinging from a tree limb by a broken neck.” For them, “Too late,” we’re told, “was never in their programming.” As Superman relates to newshound Jimmy, “the heroes will go on, kicked upstairs to oversee the development of bright new middle-line personnel, and they will watch their system falling apart.” They’ll see more and more instances of this kind of “singularity,” of what’s not in the programming, “and they’ll call it cancer, and just won’t know what things are coming to, or what’s the meaning of it all” (766-7). “These are not the end times,” Herman and Weisenburger say, “they are the middle times” (220). A time when the cliché narratives no longer apply, no longer construct a believable reality into which we can fit the world; this claim applies to TV tropes as much as to the grand narratives of religion—no optimistic beginning, no apocalyptic finale. In Jameson’s preface to Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition*, he notes that one of Lyotard’s greatest achievements was positing that narrative structures are affirmed as a “central instance of the human mind and mode of thinking as legitimate as abstract logic” (xi).<sup>48</sup> *Gravity’s Rainbow* offers us a postmodern loss of our ability to put history into narratives, and the novel “will not supply a name for this condition; Pynchon’s readers would soon enough draft his novel into the service of postmodernism” (Herman and Weisenburger 220). But by revealing not only the impotence of “master narratives,” to invoke Lyotard (Byron’s Gnostic Kabbalah, Christian redemption of the elect, even the romance narrative) but the impotence of these new, postmodern narratives as well, which abound like so much useless confetti, the novel calls perhaps to the need for new narratives to project the world and its history onto.

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<sup>48</sup> Jameson, however, argues that Lyotard did not go far enough—the master narratives which Lyotard describes were not destroyed, but hid underground as the political unconscious, the ideological drives of society. The unearthing of these ideologies (one such being the Marxist one Jameson adopts) is what can allow us to regain some sense of history. “History,” he says in the *Political Unconscious*, “is *not a text*, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that, as an *absent cause*, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form” (35, italics my own). This concept of requiring a textual form of history to provide us with our own historicity will be crucial to the hermeneutical praxis I propose.

A bit on Frans Van der Grooy, the 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch colonialist (and ancestor of Katje) who took part in the extermination of the dodoes:

We're told that Frans went off to the island of Mauritius with a boatload of hogs, "and lost thirteen years toting his haakbus through the ebony forests, wandering the swamps and lava flows, systematically killing off the native dodoes for reasons he could not explain" (110). The motion of uncovering the priming-powder, the flash, of reducing the dodo to a thrashing mess, "unable now even to locate his murderer, ruptured, splashing blood, raucously dying," becomes a sacred and holy ritual. At home, his brother, fully invested in the Tulip craze, reads the years-worth of letters as they come all at once, but cannot tell "what kept [Frans] out among the winter cyclones, stuffing pieces of old uniform down after the lead balls" (111). Frans doesn't even eat the dodoes—unable to bear their flesh, he leaves the corpses out to rot. In a particularly haunting scene, Frans aims his haakbus at an egg and waits an entire day for it to hatch, such that he can "destroy the infant, egg of light into egg of darkness, within its first minute of amazed vision, of wet down stirred cool by these southeast trades." It never hatches, and he leaves in the dark (111).

When the solitude would take him, Frans would join a hunting party, which would shoot, crazily, at everything in sight. And yet:

This furious host were losers, impersonating a race chosen by God. The colony, the venture, was dying—like the ebony trees they were stripping from the island, like the poor species they were removing totally from the earth. By 1681, *Didus ineptus* would be gone, by 1710 so would every last settler from Mauritius. The enterprise here would have lasted about a human lifetime.

To some, it made sense. They saw the stumbling birds ill-made to the point of Satanic intervention, so ugly as to embody argument against a Godly creation. Was Mauritius some first poison trickle through the sheltering dikes of Earth? Christians must stem it here, or perish in a second Flood, loosed this time not by God but by the Enemy. The act of ramming home the charges into their musketry became for these men a devotional act, one whose symbolism they understood.

But if they were chosen to come to Mauritius, why had they also been chosen to fail, and leave? Is that a choosing, or is it a passing-over? Are they Elect, or are they Preterite, and doomed as dodoes? (112)

The colonialists cannot make sense of the fact that their Christian narrative trajectories have made them, potentially, failures. But their condition is felt as one similar to the dodos they massacre. Their world contains a seemingly endless supply of dodoes—it would be useless to teach them about the horror of their genocide. The material conditions which feed into their ideologies have made them preterite playthings in the service of colonialism, and they have reinvented religious symbols for the reification of this ideology; and this reveals to them, however faintly, that perhaps their faith has been subverted.

The trouble with the dodoes, we're told, is that they cannot speak, and that meant "no chance of coopting them in to what their round and flaxen invaders were calling Salvation" (112). But at one point, Frans "could not keep from finally witnessing a miracle: a Gift of Speech... a Conversion of the Dodoes." The dodoes line up, ranked in thousands, on the shore, from all walks of the island,

waddled in awkward pilgrimage to this assembly: to be sanctified, taken in... *For as much as they are the creatures of God, and have the gift of rational discourse, acknowledging that only in His Word is eternal life to be found...* And there are tears of happiness in the eyes of the dodoes. They are all brothers now, they and the humans who used to hunt them, brother in Christ, the little baby they dream now of sitting near, roosting on his stable, feathers at peace, watching over him and his dear face all night long... (113)

The postmodern religious condition, Pynchon's postsecular, may come to be seen as the condition of Frans Van der Groov. There is a sense in which certain atrocities (neo-colonialism being here the most obvious) are weakly justified in virtue of some faint and indistinct spirituality—in a way this is the antithesis to McClure. But there is also a sense in which the passive inability to really explain why what occurring is occurring, explain how the motions of atrocity can become sacred ritual, where the postsecular character feels less like a crusader in the service of their divinity than a marionette in the control of increasingly bizarre and incomprehensible historical movements. "Are they Elect, or are they Preterite, and doomed as dodoes?" Perhaps they're neither Preterite nor Elect; but doomed

they must be. The “salvation” of the dodoes, their vision of the dodo Christ, is described as a result of their gift of speech. This speech stands in for their ability to enter into the dialectics of a history which, in its *materiality*, must have and did lead to their extermination.

### *Conclusions: Vomit in Reverse*

...the gray sky looked as if it had been rubbed with a soiled eraser. It held no angels, flaming crosses, olive-bearing doves, wheels within wheels. Only a newspaper struggled in the air like a kite with a broken spine.<sup>49</sup>

In an essay on Simone Weil and nihilism entitled “On the Ethics of Weakness,” Alessandro Dal Lago notes Weil’s attention to false myths which in modernity prevail as, in some sense, narrative propaganda to accelerate the rationalization (and, paradoxically, secularization) of society. But these new religion bonds are vacuous. “Weil often notes,” he says,

the need to substitute lost bonds with false religions, with false bonds. During the first decades of this century, when she was alive, the purely imaginary need for a new cosmos took on the forms of “civil religion” or “collective consciousness.” Or alternatively, as in pre-Nazi Germany, it manifested itself through an anachronistic appeal to the myths of the land and of roots. In our time, the pretense to construct a social body, a culture, is no longer tenable. If nothing else, social discourse has given up replacing religions, showing itself for what it is, a discourse on the organization of force. (Vattimo 129)

This may as well stand, with a postmodern update, as our thesis concerning *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Like the thin roots of spirituality which teem through the Slothropite line, the spiritual bonds have been subverted by a modern, rational, and secular ideology, and they use the allure of these older spiritual traditions to justify whatever the secular present has to offer. The Nazi appeal to Germany’s roots—presented in *Gravity’s Rainbow* as Teutonic mythology which venerates the Rocket—being just one

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<sup>49</sup> Nathaniel West, *Miss Lonelyhearts*.

such example; but even the preterite/elect distinction comes to be seen as political impotence (and when the distinction is dissolved, such that all fall into preterition, culture itself becomes preterite). If we, like Pynchon, are able to utilize a methodology of analysis which places this history in a text of its own, one which takes historicity as its own master narrative, we can perhaps see these discourses of force for what they are.

At one point in the novel we encounter a Slothropian genealogy in reverse: “Ghosts of fisherman, glassworkers, fur traders, renegade preachers, hilltop patriarchs and valley politicians go avalanching back,” back to the flagship *Arbella* on which Slothrop’s first American ancestor “had been a mess cook or something.” We see the whole fleet getting sucked back out to sea, out of Boston Harbor, back across the Atlantic,

a redemption of every mess cook who ever slipped and fell when the deck made an unexpected move, the night’s stew collecting itself up out of the planks and off the indignant shoes of the more elect, slithering in a fountain back into the pewter kettle as the servant himself staggers upright again and the vomit he slipped on goes gushing back into the mouth that spilled it. (206)

This idea of history as vomit, as the historical dialecticism of the elect and the preterite, parallels ‘Thanatz’ fall to preterition with the symbolic mess cook and slipping. It invokes the relationship between “preterite” and “elect” as perhaps nothing more than material circumstance (and, even, a nod at the revolutionary capacity for the preterite to ‘unelect,’ though perhaps not intentionally). But this rewritten version of the Slothropite genealogy we already countered far earlier, describing their roots in the construction of America, points to a conscious desire to, in some sense, *go back*. Of course, we can’t go back; but we can at least, with this newfound power for historical narrative, look back, construct our own genealogies, and (Hauntologically) feel the melancholic rhythms of the many presents that could have been.

In another peculiar episode, Pirate and Katje seem to take a trip to hell. Hell, for Pynchon, looks a lot like Coney Island. There are “cafés to sit in and watch the sunset,” and enormous pastry



carts with a limitless choice of sweets to satisfy the saccharomaniac, fudges ranging “from licorice to divinity” (546). There are street entertainers doing handsprings, and “choirs of kazoos playing Gilbert and Sullivan medleys” (547). This hell, which reimagines the postmodern shopping district, is “without friction:” movement through its galleries and esplanades seems integrated into the very construction of the postmodern space itself. There is also a row of offices Pirate recognizes as belonging to all the Committees he works for (appropriately labelled Beaverboard Row, named after the man who took Jessica from him) invoking the hellish nature of bureaucracy. Pirate realizes that this hell of superimposed levels, of storefronts and shoppers and kazoo players is “the milieux of every sort of criminal soul” (557). He and Katje begin to list all the people they’ve had love with in precise detail of the act (including Pirate admitting to an act with a six year old), and they begin to learn how to love the people.

In this hell of postmodernity there is also a small shack with a stovepipe coming out the top, car parts strewn about the yard in what Herman and Weisenburger call a cross between “some saint’s hovel in a Hieronymus Bosch painting [and] a coal-miner’s cabin in Appalachia” (187). A sign on the shingle reads “DEVIL’S ADVOCATE,” and inside is a Jesuit priest named Father Rapier, who preaches that “once the technical means of control have reached a certain size, a certain degree of *being connected* one to another, the chances for freedom are over for good” (548). The completion of the cartelization project means complete unfreedom. Without the posited analysis of postmodernity as ideological and narrative unfreedom, this vision of hell may be confusing. He says that we need an order of courage that allows us to view “Them” as just as mortal as we are, just as afraid of death. But he also says that we need to fight to demand our own immortality. “To believe that each of Them *will* personally die,” he says, “is also to believe that Their system will die—that some chance of renewal, some dialectic, is still operating in History” (549).

This vision of hell and sermon from Father Rapier reinvasion hell as carrying the potential for its own emancipation—paradoxical given that it is, after all, hell. But if Father Rapier can deliver his sermon here of all places, perhaps there is some chance the unconscious utopic narratives in postmodern capitalism can be, somehow, dug up and repurposed to rewrite the history of the elect. Being devil’s advocate is to propose a history rewritten in service to the preterite. Perhaps this is a hopeless task; that does not mean that it is one not worth pursuing.

It seems to me that on some level, as McClure believes, ‘open dwelling’ as it’s expressed in fiction is a utopic gesture, one which presses back “against the tendency to reduce all forms of religious dwelling to a choice between stifling routinization of the sacred and the fiercer enclosures of fundamentalism” (*Partial Faiths* 196). But it is a failed one. It falls short; but more importantly it knows it. Open dwelling, the sacred moment in fiction, is not necessarily sarcastic in postsecular novels, like those of Pynchon—the beauty of these scenes, such as the one of Roger and Jessica in church, their intimacy and gentle power, are testament alone to their authors’ desires for encountering the sacred. And I certainly also don’t mean to say that certain authors don’t advocate this very same open dwelling (I’m tempted to say this is most often the case). But doomed to fail before even penned, the failure of the sacred to properly reenchant in the face of the greater powers, institutions of force, transforms their purpose from one of spiritual seeking to political rebellion, for a recompense that precedes the crime which needs recompense. In their failures we find the *cause* of their failures, an enemy only distinguished by the sudden luminosity of these sacred moments as they spark and combust and are smothered once again; an enemy I’d like to call Force, but will leave unnamed for now.

### III

#### Towards a Textual Hermeneutics

A Klee painting named *Angelus Novus* shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.<sup>50</sup>

It might seem as though my unwillingness to approach the sacred without the necessary postmodernist tools is, in some sense, unfair—perhaps even problematic. It seems to expose a particular kind of bias: that all religious or spiritual thinking is necessarily, in some sense, ‘inauthentic,’ that instances of spiritual language, engagement, and imagery in cultural products—instances of what we have been calling the sacred in literature—can be traced back to some ideology or mechanism of postmodernity, some symptom of contemporary depthlessness or historical amnesia. It would seem to strip religious thinking of a certain kind of autonomy, of an ideological freedom. Perhaps it is for this reason that Jameson’s position that “spirituality by definition no longer exists: the definition in question is in fact that of postmodernism itself” (*Postmodernism* 309) strikes some (like McClure) as particularly brash, if not vulgar.

It would be perhaps an unfair assumption to say that this ideological undergirding renders spiritual thinking ‘inauthentic’—the very thesis of Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic*, that capitalistic ideology finds its roots in Protestant ideology, instantly invokes the philosophical complexity of such

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<sup>50</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*.

a question of authenticity. It would perhaps be more fruitful to begin a formulation of that question of authenticity by deconstructing spiritual and non-spiritual modes of thinking to find what makes them fundamentally dialectical or even ‘deep’ in the first place. But this is a somewhat irrelevant discussion—regardless of authenticity I do not, in purporting that contemporary spiritual thinking takes postmodernity as its substratum, mean to suggest the invalidity of spiritual thinking, of its being perhaps faulty or inadequate in comparison with other modes of discourse (scientific, rational, etc.). What I mean instead to suggest is that there are undeniable processes of modernization, of the transformation of the landscape into one entirely dominated and reconstructed by human society, of the penetration of that culture into our entire beings, of the rapid disenchantment of a landscape either made inert or replaced entirely by so many dead objects. And that this means that our modes of thinking are entirely grounded upon the logic of the cultural dominant of that society—which, for us, happens to be that of capitalism. As Jameson tells us, what we are witnessing is the dissolution of the autonomy of the public sphere; a dissolution which is expressed, ironically, in terms of the explosion of said public sphere, “a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm, to the point at which everything in our social life... can be said to be ‘cultural’ in some original and yet untheorized sense” (*Postmodernism* 48). As Debord writes in *Society of the Spectacle*, “though separated from what they produce, people nevertheless produce every detail of their world with ever-increasing power. They thus also find themselves increasingly separated from that world. The closer their life comes to being their own creation, the more they are excluded from that life” (33). In the unstoppable mode of postmodern cultural production, culture and its artifacts pile endlessly beneath our feet, creating a platform which grows increasingly unstable the higher it rises.

This provides a unique challenge for the critic: inundated by the cultural logic of postmodernity, inescapably surrounded and penetrated by it, any critical distance that may be taken from objects of criticism is abolished. The two “precapitalist enclaves (Nature and the Unconscious)

which offered extraterritorial and Archimedean footholds for critical effectivity” have themselves, in postmodernity, been thoroughly colonized. The many and discursive representations of such a reality in the form of critical discourse might come to be seen, then, as “peculiar new forms of realism,” though at the same time “so many attempts to distract and divert us from that reality or to disguise its contradictions and resolve them in the guise of various formal mystifications” (*Postmodernism* 49).

In the *Political Unconscious*, Jameson provides a Marxist framework for narrative interpretation which rests fundamentally upon two ideas: that a political interpretation of literary texts takes priority over any other interpretative frameworks; and that a Marxist framework is ideal inasmuch as its own ‘master narrative’ of history is best able to capture the historicity of the present moment. In the present context, he argues, there exist various master narrative frameworks with which we can reach back into literary history and interpret the past; but, necessary to this interpretation is that we place each and every interpretive model within the respective master narrative itself. Interpretation, then, is never an act of isolation—it works endlessly within the holism of the framework and, in the present postmodernism, these master narratives seem paradoxically to coexist in a non-hierarchical way. For this reason Jameson refers to an “antitranscendent hermeneutic model,” an immanent critique whose function it will be to explore the contradictions of society via the texts the society produces—texts I see as encapsulating both the creative productions of a socio-economic system (postmodernity) and the critiques of such cultural productions (postmodernism).

Now, I would like to look back at that funny word ‘hermeneutic.’ After all, the ideological specter haunting this essay (and one which perhaps haunts *all* literary analysis) is the one which seeks to ‘reenchant’ the text itself, to provide literary analysis with an object of critique which retains enough of its historical luster to provide the former with justification in the historical context. Yet the very definition of hermeneutics, which presupposes that some “correct” interpretation exists

such that the text becomes a signpost pointing to *the* greater truth, contradicts the postmodern praxis of interpretation; and, furthermore, contradicts the very project of postsecular authors themselves.

In the case of the authors, postsecular texts clearly seek to avoid definitive interpretation. To do so would be, ironically, to return to the very structure of religious hermeneutics which postsecular novels avoid with vigor—the collapse of the tent of God in the beginning of *Blood Meridian*, the silence of God in *The Road*, the futility of Slothrop's prayers in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the ontological multiplicity of *Vineland* being some examples. Not to mention the confusing and non-definitive conclusions of all four novels, which offer no hints as to which reality or narrative trajectory we should prioritize.

What seems, then, to be the only proper way to analyze such texts, and thus avoid the interpretive paralysis which may ensue, is with the postmodern phenomenon of theoretical discourse which dominates contemporary literary discourse and of which postsecular discourse is a part. Within this postmodern framework we come to understand that our gaze at history is always subjective, for us always postmodern. Rather than posit a historicist reading of narratives (which produce ideological narratives belonging to the ideology of capitalism) we must redeploy our subjectivities in the service of, as Vattimo describes, the “liquidized” histories of the ‘preterite’ classes. For it is “disdain for such ‘liquidation’ that really moves the revolutionary decision” (Vattimo 42).

Benjamin's analysis of *Angelus Novus* describes a being which feels enormous compassion for the dreg heap of history which the storm of progress piles before it. Its desire is simply to close its wings. We must stop conceiving of this heap as a chain of logical events; to do so betrays our own utopic drive to find compensation for narratives of force which modernity has terroristically espoused. Paradoxically, we must save history by recognizing that we cannot have it; rather, all

history comes to us in narrative form, even though history is not a narrative. We must save our own narratives by placing history within it. “We need history,” as Nietzsche said, “But we need it in a manner different from the way in which the spoiled idler in the garden of knowledge uses it.”<sup>51</sup>

When we catalogue instances of the postsecular, it is not enough to do so in the service of broken narratives, of manifestations of the very postsecular faith characters develop. Postsecular faith is a symptom of the same postmodernity which has literary critics—unsure if their practice is itself a secular one—ready to embrace incompleteness as sacred depth. Novels, bearers of narrative itself, surely in some sense must be given as examples of the material history of their own time; “yet even if our aim, as literary analysts,” Jameson says in *The Political Unconscious*,

is rather to demonstrate the ways in which modernism—far from being a mere reflection of the reification of late nineteenth-century social life—is also a revolt against that reification and a symbolic act which involves a whole utopian compensation for increasing dehumanization on the level of daily life, we are first obliged to establish a continuity between these two regional zones or sectors—the practice of language in the literary work, and the experience of *anomie*, standardization, rationalizing desacralization in the *Umwelt* or world of daily life—such that the latter can be grasped as that determinate situation, dilemma, contradiction, or subtext, to which the former comes as a symbolic resolution or solution. (Jameson 42)

A model of textual analysis that takes historical narratives of the oppressed is capable of bestowing the power of historical consciousness unto our analyses, and thus avoids the “windless closure of the formalisms,” as Jameson says, the authoritarianism of New Criticism being one example. But we must come to see literary production as *both* a product of postmodern ideology and a utopic gesture *against* the pathologies of postmodernity. This is what I hope to have demonstrated with the postsecular, the sacred moment in fiction: at one time it offers a solution to modernity that fails in its own foundation of pastiche and historical deafness; at the same time, however, its failure should tell us why it fails.

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<sup>51</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*.

It would seem, then, that if literary analysis were to take as its aim the extrapolation of “truth” from the literature, it would be reasonable to suggest a hermeneutics of the text—the text and not the work, to make Barthes’ distinction, where “text” refers to our abstraction away from the closed signification of the work, to an emphasis on the individual readings and extrapolations (such that the subject becomes the object). A hermeneutics which takes the present state of multinational capitalism as the greater truth to which the text points. This hermeneutics of the text may seem paradoxical: works are supposed to supply their own truth, and thus good and bad hermeneutical readings of works are to be judged based on their accuracy in approximating the greater truth to which the work points. Texts don’t seem to have such a greater truth nesting inside them by definition. But hopefully the point here is obvious. The readers of (particularly) postmodern texts are as much subjects of the same cultural dominant as the texts themselves, and the interpretations of texts becomes the dominant signifier for the reality of the society to which both belong.

As the cataloging of this new object of analysis (interpretation/critical discourse) reveals obvious trends to be catalogued and taxonomized (interpretive frameworks), what is discovered is that, first, each trend of discourse presents unique theories to describe texts; and second, that these different frameworks compete with each other in their abilities to “deeply” extrapolate from texts in a way which strongly avoids dialectical synthesis, *aufhebung* or sublation. I speak now, of course, of the postmodern discursiveness which I discussed at the beginning of this essay. But what I took for granted earlier—namely, that a postmodern reading takes priority over other readings—I’ll return to now to say that this rainbow of loosely competing and discursive interpretative frameworks can most plausibly benefit this aim of analysis to find the “truth” of texts when they exist under an overarching postmodernist framework.

Yet it might still be said that this aim of analysis towards the truth of a text, which I offer the hermeneutics of the text as the appropriate corresponding praxis, is not strictly correct. Or at least,



“truth” may be the incorrect word to use, perhaps too political for a project which is not strictly political in itself, and that the better word is something like “meaning,” a related but not synonymous term (and, to be sure, difficult to quite pin down). But it is even in this regard that I see the project as necessary. The argument for a certain authenticity of this framework lies in its ability to describe what is not just a cultural ideology but a real historical and material moment that has as *one* of its ideologies and pathologies pastiche and historical amnesia; in other words, it provides the best framework for thinking historically at all in a society that can hardly do so itself. This historical consciousness is what allows for deeper readings of texts, ones more richly developed and better at describing our own present situation. (And this “hierarchy” of appropriate theoretical modes also does away with much of the intercompetition of these modes by providing them with one and the same logic and interpretive aim.)

Under this overarching mode of analysis, the various other discourses can then be offered as analytical frameworks providing unique revelations about the cultural dominant. Postsecularism, for instance (and postsecular discourse has been unique in its general willingness to cede at least part of its autonomy to the historical moment of postmodernity, probably because its main proponents were postmodernists from the start) becomes more useful as an interpretive mode which has as *its* aim the description of religions’ and spiritualities’ radiations and manifestations in a landscape that *already has been* totally “desacralized.” The process is twofold: in the first instance, postsecular theorists look for the postsecular in the texts, analyze them, trace their logic and their rhythms rhizomatically outward from the page; what is then necessary, however, is that the texts *as well as* the postsecular discourse surrounding the text be analyzed simultaneously as textual objects which point to the spiritual manifestations of postmodernity, the religious leftover, the husk of spiritual discourse without its original kernel of the true Otherness (unterritorialized by postmodernity) of the sacred. A postsecular reading which takes as its aim the exploration and promotion of a new kind of

spirituality which can exist and flourish in the new multinational-corporate climate (as McClure does in the conclusion to *Partial Faiths*, where he advocates for “open practice”) terminates too quickly and, worse, it shoots itself in the foot by failing to recognize that its very existence is heavily indebted to the logic of postmodernity.

What I don’t want to make seem the case is that this paper could have been written about any field of discourse that is not immanent and historically conscious and end up with the same conclusion, and it is now that I’ll say that postsecularism is distinctly privileged in this regard, which the word “hermeneutics” already alludes to. This philosophy and textual-analytical praxis of history is able to properly articulate the cultural movements of the past while at the same time being critically aware of its own historicity, the narratives it inscribes the past into. But it is undeniably indebted to, as Jameson notes in the *Political Unconscious*, “Christian historicism and the theological origins of the first great hermeneutic system in Western tradition” (18). Even if the older systems no longer appeal to us, fail to deliver us into a well-mapped contemporary cosmos, they most certainly provide us with the tools for making our own. It is for this reason that postsecular characters fumble with the historic religious tools of hermeneutics in the midst of ruined and flooded cathedrals—they worked before, but they need updating. It may seem obvious to say so (why else would we read?), but inasmuch as the characters of postmodern fiction are produced from the same historical designation we are, we must learn how to read postmodern fiction from the ways these characters understand (and fail to understand) the world around them.

In Milan Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, a man, Tomas, becomes estranged from his son, for whom he cares little. A famous surgeon who loses his career under the communist regime which overtook Prague, Tomas and his second wife move to the country to live out their days on a collective farm. It is here Tomas realizes that his son has done the same; after being involved in various anti-communist political activities, he married the daughter of a priest and

entirely cut ties with his pro-communist mother, moving to the countryside to cultivate both food and faith. In letters he writes to his father, Tomas learns that his son sees belief in God as capable of bringing “the kingdom of God on earth.” “He tells me,” Tomas relates, “that the Church is the only voluntary association in our country which eludes the control of the state. I wonder whether he’s joined the Church because it helps him to oppose the regime or because he really believes in God” (307-308). It should not seem like too far a stretch to suggest that Tomas’ son’s faith bloomed from the gratitude he felt for being entered into a narrative counter to the regime. While political narratives become increasingly postmodernized, reduced to “kitsch,” movements of opposition in particular forming “the kitsch of the Grand March” (257), the Church is a beacon of political hope which basks in its own impotence. It says, “look at my messiah, my kingdom of God on earth. Look at the hopelessness of my story and how its failure, its reduction to mere kitsch, parallels all the others. See how my cry of opposition may be drowned; but take note of the bubbles floating to the surface!” Kundera writes that kitsch produces tears which say, “How nice to be moved, together by all mankind, by children running on the grass!” (251). It is tears for these bubbles.

The postsecular in fiction has been seen as an affirmation of postsecular faith to describe a world which secular narratives of progress have dismissed as unenchanted, but in which pulses of the spiritual are most certainly felt. But what novels like *Gravity’s Rainbow* show is that these spiritual inflections do not actually *reenchant* the disenchanted world, but instead provide a critique of master ideological narratives of a progress, ones which—in their obtuse modern forms—we thought all but destroyed, but which instead have simply gone underground. Postsecular faith is a narrative that runs counter to the logic of oppression and of the State; it does not succeed in overthrowing such narratives, but its failure should invoke the sympathy of Klee’s angel. By embracing postsecular faith, the unconscious revolutionary and utopic gesture of the sacred is nipped in the bud. “Just as flowers turn their heads towards the sun,” Benjamin writes in the *Theses*, “so too does that which has

been turn, by virtue of a secret kind of heliotropism, *towards* the sun which is dawning in the sky of history” (Benjamin IV). When we interpret a text, what motivates this interpretation? Do we add it to the dreg heap of historicism as another example of this or that, consume and regurgitate it in our unconscious impulse to consume partial narratives?; or do we realize our utopic gesture of *reading for narratives*, of searching for narratives of depth and freedom?

Dal Lago notes of Simone Weil her capacity to understand how the modernized world produces, in its totality, a certain limitlessness, an unshackling of the imagination. “But with such unfettering,” he says, “no new freedoms will be conquered, as in the mythology of progress” (*Weak Thought* 127). The result is a fall into bottomless and dissolution of the soul which distinctly describes the case of our dear Slothrop. In an extraordinary two-page essay titled “Algebra,” Weil remarks that “Capitalism has brought about the emancipation of collective humanity with respect to nature. But this collective humanity has itself taken on with respect to the individual the oppressive function formerly exercised by nature.” In the modern world, which seeks to rest itself on itself, to completely reconstruct the world in its own image—a process accomplished in postmodern capitalism—human beings blunderingly dominate themselves in processes they can hardly begin to describe, a man-made cosmos that avoids all mapping. The question, she asks, is: “can this emancipation, won by society, be transferred to the individual?” Whatever the answer, it is this question, written or spectral, which must preface our readings.

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