

The Linking Feature: Degenerative Systems in Pynchon and Spengler

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Man has a tropism for order. Keys in one pocket, change in another. Mandolins are tuned G D A E. The physical world has a tropism for disorder, entropy. Man against nature . . . the battle of the centuries. Keys yearn to mix with change. Mandolins strive to get out of tune. Every order has within it the germ of destruction. All order is doomed, yet the battle is worthwhile.

—Nathanael West (104)

Written at a time when the orderly operations of the American business system appeared to have been laid waste by the most destructive of germs, these lines from Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933) afford access to the related visions of civilization's decay presented by Pynchon in *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) and Oswald Spengler in *The Decline of the West* (1918–1923). My investigation of Pynchon's Spenglerian vision considers the nature of West's battle and asks whether it is worthwhile or even possible.

I begin by discussing the appeal of Spengler's historical, cultural and political vision to both the Pynchon generation and the novelist himself, particularly Spengler's sense of a seemingly all-powerful Faustian enterprise driven to systemic destruction by the very instruments with which it secured its dominion, and his dissident, non-rational combination of sources and methods, long marginalized and demonized by the dominant culture. After reviewing Spengler's broad sense of the nature of the historical process and its reception within the intellectual context of Pynchon's generation, I document Spengler's general vision of Western civilization's decline, comparing and contrasting it with Pynchon's as set out in *Gravity's Rainbow*: on the one hand, common perceptions of systemic Faustian decay expressed through imperialism, militarization, transnational conflict and social and cultural homogenization; on the other, divergent readings of the nature of politics and history. Using this discussion as a context, the essay goes on to address the nature and status of liberty in the *Decline* and

Gravity's Rainbow: enclosed by destiny and necessity in the former, hemmed in by nature and power in the latter. Finally, to explain the diminution of liberty in Pynchon's fiction, I discuss the relation between the erotic and the destructive in fueling the reproduction of what Pynchon calls the Rocket State.

The appeal of a long-deceased German cultural historian for a young American writer commencing a fiction about a world the former scarcely knew may appear surprising. But in *The Decline of the West*, Spengler offered a vision of an apparently powerful culture doomed to exhaustion and sterility which served the purposes of a number of those in Pynchon's post-Beat generation. In the introduction to *Slow Learner* (1984), the collection of his early short stories, Pynchon recalls the "somber glee at any idea of mass destruction or decline" (13) he affected as a U.S. Navy serviceman and a Cornell student during the late 1950s. A decade later, in the context of race riots and assassinations, intense generational conflict at home and a murderous war abroad, the glee may have weakened. But as he worked on his third novel, *Gravity's Rainbow*, the sense of decline could hardly have been stronger. When Andrew Hacker, a Cornell professor, published *The End of the American Era* in 1970, even *Time* magazine could see him as sitting "like an American Spengler, waiting for the fall of practically everything" (qtd. on Hacker back cover). Ignored for decades by his profession, and thought of, if at all, as a harbinger of the defeated Nazi tyranny, the prophet of doom was speaking once again to a nation which, at the apparent height of its powers, was itself haunted by the spectre of genocide and loss.

Particularly for those disaffiliating themselves from the United States during the 1950s and 1960s, much of Spengler's appeal lay precisely in the systemic nature of his vision, which found in all aspects of a given civilization signs of unavoidable decline. The postwar era had witnessed the apparent perfection of that corporate-dominated mass production, mass consumption, bureaucratic and technological way of life documented in works like J. K. Galbraith's *Affluent Society* (1958) and William H. Whyte's *Organization Man* (1956). In the workplace a combination of what Antonio Gramsci called Fordism and Taylorism had contained or coopted class conflict. The diverse tools of behaviorism, psychoanalysis and popular or mass culture had played their part elsewhere. To both radicals (like Herbert Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization* [1955] and *One-Dimensional Man* [1964]) and liberals (like Daniel Bell in *The End of Ideology* [1960]), the system appeared homeostatic. Science and technology, exploited through a liberal political economy, had engendered a civilization so effective it seemed virtually second nature. With the successful completion of the Apollo

lunar-landing project, which for millions articulated the nation's essence, the system's horizons during the late 1960s appeared infinite.

For those at odds with what *Time* proprietor Henry Luce dubbed "the American Century," the Spenglerian perspective offered a range of advantages. Thus within the terms of *The Decline of the West*, the lunar-landing project did reveal the true means and ends of all Western civilization: as a Faustian enterprise for a Faustian culture, it led directly to the barren reaches of an inhospitable wasteland. More generally, the Spenglerian vision found evidence throughout the affluent society of a grand design in which science and technology were combining to dominate, decode and finally copy the natural world itself. If to Spengler himself in the early twentieth century such an objective still appeared some way from realization, to later cultural critics like Lewis Mumford in *The Pentagon of Power* (1970) it was rapidly being realized, not least in the space probes that constituted the modern world's pyramids. Less abstract design than psychopathological fetish, the mad dream of a fully-engineered universe led in Mumford's view to the creation of a "megamachine" through which mankind would seek both to defy death and to reproduce itself technologically, a view present in the writings of Marshall McLuhan (notably *The Mechanical Bride* [1951]) and in films like Stanley Kubrick's *Doctor Strangelove* (1963). While time differences may have distinguished their perspectives, to Mumford as to Spengler the dream carried within itself the seeds of its own destruction (see Mumford plates 11, 14-15).

If Spengler offered a critical vision of Western civilization with considerable relevance for postwar America's disaffected in general, he may also have appealed to Pynchon in particular on personal and intellectual grounds. Like Pynchon, Spengler drew on both the scientific and artistic realms, in his case inheriting both his father's interest in engineering and his mother's cultural leanings. Like Pynchon, too, he studied the natural sciences at university before turning to comprehensive reading in other fields. Moreover, whereas another cyclical historian, Arnold Toynbee, gained postwar fame and influence through his popular twelve-volume *Study of History*, Spengler remained for years a forgotten writer, a kind of intellectual preterite, abandoned at the margins of a culture the more establishmentarian Toynbee defended (Hughes 3-6). Perhaps more important still, Spengler's rejection of then-dominant rationalist approaches to historical study (discussed in more detail below) may also have appealed to Pynchon. At a time when Marcuse was documenting the ways the dominant culture had colonized philosophy, language and consciousness itself (ODM), Spengler offered a way of seeing which resisted one-dimensional perception. At a time when Thomas Kuhn's concept of

“paradigm shifts” had brought into doubt the claims of scientific method to legitimacy *sub specie æternitatis*, Spengler provided a vision that might not itself be a part of the Faustian design.¹

That *The Decline of the West* employed non-rationalist methods only to infer a design in history greater and more deterministic than any previously proposed may have both fascinated and appalled Pynchon. What seems clear is that Spengler’s vision influenced Pynchon’s writing, especially *Gravity’s Rainbow*, in a number of ways.

Born in Blankenburg, Germany, in 1880, philosopher of history Spengler, who published three works in his lifetime, never held an academic post, failed as a political commentator, ran afoul of the Nazi government, and died in isolation at fifty-five in 1936. In the shadow of the First World War, however, *The Decline of the West* became extremely influential, apparently explaining to the conflict’s survivors—victors and vanquished—the exhaustion and bankruptcy of Ezra Pound’s “botched civilization,” which in warfare had witnessed “wastage as never before” (I 91, 80). Drawing on biological metaphors, Spengler’s epic study argued that Western (or Faustian) civilization was merely the latest in a sequence of historical cycles, from the Egyptian through the Apollonian, all of which had (like plants) sprouted, flourished and matured before moving inescapably toward old age and death. Though conceived of before the crisis at Sarajevo, *The Decline of the West* seemed to many to make sense of an otherwise senseless slaughter, the carnage of the battlefields effectively confirming the philosopher’s visions of doom. A generation later, in the wake of Nazi tyranny and a still greater conflict, Spengler’s reputation and influence would, in some ways paradoxically, decline. Tainted by both Spengler’s nationality and his anti-democratic sympathies, its tone out of keeping with the sense of hope and confidence expressed in President Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms address and institutionalized by the United Nations, Spengler’s work would be condemned as politically extreme and intellectually questionable, and then ignored. Ironically, his own experience and influence described more faithfully the very trajectory—high summer followed by extended fall—he identified in the civilizations of man.

Historical and political considerations may have subjected him to greater obloquy than the normal ebb and flow of intellectual fashion; personal and academic factors intensified his sense of isolation. Yet Spengler was alone neither in rejecting (and being rejected by) dominant positivist schools of historical interpretation nor in embracing alternative visions of the past. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many others rejected the scientific trend which had burgeoned in the wake of Charles Darwin’s evolutionary theories. Men like Georges

Sorel, Vilfredo Pareto and Henri Bergson (whose *L'Évolution Créatrice* first appeared in 1907)—either idealists, cyclical historians or post-Nietzschean anti-rationalists—felt that an understanding of history demanded a distinct approach: one that was artistic and philosophical rather than scientific. They believed in sensing history intuitively rather than taking it apart rationally using analytical methods whose claims to scientific legitimacy in practice simply sanctified the mechanistic recreation of a past whose essence was thereby irretrievably lost (Hughes 22–40). Spengler himself claimed that the cause-and-effect way of investigating history failed to do more than scratch its surface (Hughes 71). “Such a ‘pragmatic’ handling of history,” he wrote, was “nothing but a piece of ‘natural science’ in disguise” (DW 1.6) (as rigid in its own way as the refusal of hyper-rationalist Edward Pointsman in *Gravity's Rainbow* to accommodate Dog Vanya's deviation from causal stimulus-response patterns). It did not try to sense the “soul” of history which bound each distinct culture together inwardly.

Unlike Pointsman, who mechanically seeks out—that is, engineers—chains of cause and effect, Spengler chose to take intuitive leaps and bounds. In doing so, he appealed not only to a distinct philosophy of history but also to an alternative scheme of historical structure and process. Rejecting then- (and to-this-day-) dominant, Christian-influenced concepts of history as a universal, progressive and eschatological or goal-directed phenomenon, Spengler was attracted by the sort of cyclical image associated with the ancient Greeks (though Spengler himself denied the latter had any conception of world history). Drawing on his reading of Nietzsche's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1885) in particular, he concluded that the historical process did not lead to a Christian apocalypse and afterlife but took the form of an eternal recurrence or series of cycles. Spengler spoke of a “*morphology of world history*,” “a new philosophy,” and argued that history was as much biology—complete with a succession of phases leading from birth via growth to decay and death—as chronology: “The *world-as-history*, conceived, viewed and given form out of its opposite the *world-as-nature*—here is a new aspect of human existence on this earth. As yet . . . this aspect has not been realized, still less presented” (DW 1.5–6).

In contrast both to Marxists (who anticipated an inevitable return to Edenic *Urkommunismus*) and to enlightenment writers (who read history as a progressive accumulation of wisdom and material worth), Spengler argued that each cycle of (to borrow his terms) culture and civilization was a distinct phenomenon with a unique soul or style, connected to other cycles only insofar as it shared a similar pattern. Within each distinct cycle lay the possibility of a goal or direction (here Spengler differed from Greek theories of history [Dray 102–05]); within

the most recent cycle of Western or Faustian civilization, however, this goal simply took the form of a falsely and pathetically optimistic belief in ultimate salvation. Notwithstanding what he termed Western man's "second religiosity," Spengler felt that modern civilization was neither the culmination of the world's previous history nor divinely sanctioned (Hughes 85). Indeed, by placing Western history on the downward path of a separate cycle and distinguishing it from the early Christian or (as he called it) Magian culture, he directly challenged the subsequent view of historians like Toynbee that Christ had changed the course of history (Hughes 141). To Spengler, Faustian man was a pathetic individual engaged in a lonely and profoundly damaging quest for a goal that was not there.

Not surprisingly, Spengler's theories of history were for many years ignored or rejected. On intellectual grounds, he was criticized for not writing in the predominant positivist method, for distorting or suppressing evidence that did not fit his schemata and for proceeding intuitively rather than logically. He came to be viewed as a pessimist. During the 1930s (and notwithstanding that *The Decline of the West* was conceived well before 1914, and its first volume published before the armistice), his pessimism was explained—and Spengler's thorough grounding in German philosophy devalued—by reference to the impact of Germany's defeat in the Great War. After the Second World War, and paradoxically (given the Nazis' own millennial tendencies), Spengler's work became politically suspect because his vision of a world empire based in Germany, his Nietzschean ideas about the relation between elite and masses, and his statements about "colored" people led many to dismiss him as an apologist for the Third Reich rather than to see him as the prophet of Western destruction the war's barbarisms might have made him appear.²

In one sense, whatever limited theory of social or political change Spengler had—and his works noticeably lack any such systematic theory—adds to the irony these Nazi associations had already derived from his writings after *The Decline of the West*. Published three years before his death, his last book, *The Hour of Decision* (1933), was to have been a more explicit criticism of Hitler (its original title was *Germany in Danger*); but it was edited heavily in light of the National Socialist party's recent accession to power. This did not save it from being banned or keep the party from viewing Spengler suspiciously (Hughes 127–33). In another and for our purposes more important sense, however, Spengler's scheme of social and political succession within his broader cyclical vision of history provides a useful way into both his affinities with and important differences from Pynchon.

To Spengler, the historical cycle of Western culture and civilization manifests itself within successive social classes or estates. From the tenth century onward, there are two original (and diametrically opposed) estates, the clergy and the nobility, of which the latter is the practical and, to Spengler, preferable one. These estates are associated with a strong sense of territory. The decline of art and form, by which Spengler identifies the replacement of culture by civilization, begins with the advent of the third estate, the urban bourgeoisie. At this time (roughly the era of the Renaissance and the Reformation), science and philosophy begin to challenge myth and religion as the bases of behavior and belief. By the time the final estate, the formless masses, appears (roughly between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), enlightenment has engendered the rejection of culture and tradition. Socially, this succession is expressed through urbanization and the gradual appearance of what Spengler calls the World City. Economically, it manifests itself in the rise of commerce. Politically, it takes the form of democracy, which Spengler sees as not only the road to cultural destruction but also a futile or misguided endeavor. By its very success, democracy furnishes the conditions within which Caesarism will ultimately triumph.

Spengler notes a significant development toward the end of this most recent, Western or Faustian cycle. The civilization phase of the cycle, which has witnessed the dominant bourgeoisie's depreciation of taste in the arts and of aristocratic virtue, followed by imperialism, climaxes in large-scale conflict. While such a development has occurred in the past, on this occasion the character of the conflict is novel. Reduced to social and cultural uniformity by the very logic of Faustian civilization, the megalopolitan masses who engender and engage in such warfare become transnational (Hughes 83–85). An extension of the "shiftless mob" of ancient Rome or Alexandria, they surrender voluntarily to any leader capable of keeping them amused. As both the commercial plutocracy and the urban proletariat become subject to military rule, so they turn to a "second religiosity" of piety without conviction (Dray 107–09). Caesarism is transformed, meanwhile, into global tyranny.³

This vision of an increasingly infected civilization may be traced through the complex spaces of Pynchon's epic. Thus Spengler's Faustian transnationalization of power and conflict is at work in the Zone of *Gravity's Rainbow*. While Pynchon's Zone witnesses not so much the replacement of imperial power structures by totalitarian ones (in the way Hannah Arendt describes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*) as the absorption of the former by the latter, it does provide the grounds within which earlier would-be local Caesars like Blicero and

Pointsman yield up their power to an increasingly universal control system focused on the machine—in this case the rocket—and the engineering logic of what Jacques Ellul calls *technique* (Carter, FF 19–34, 272–74). Spengler's sense of bourgeois democracy as common stupefaction also informs Pynchon's vision. In the Orpheus Theatre at the end of *Gravity's Rainbow* as in the closing sections of Spengler's epic, mindless pleasures engage public attention to the point of a destruction those pleasures have themselves engendered. Similarly, just as *The Decline of the West* dismisses the notion of divine deliverance, so in Pynchon's novel the possibility of secular or spiritual salvation through the intervention of powerful redeemer figures is parodied as a self-defeating exercise.

These are just a few specific examples of the numerous identities between Spengler's and Pynchon's nightmarish speculations concerning Faustian civilization and its end. At the more general level, and perhaps most obviously, the two writers share the sense of a system, or overriding order. In Pynchon's fictions, that system is encoded not only within the masses in the Orpheus Theatre, but in the offices and employees of Yoyodyne, the layout and appearance of everywhere from war-torn Neubabelsburg to suburban San Narciso, and the more rarified corridors of power occupied by the Pierce Inveraritys and Lyle Blands of his world. In Spengler's epic, each discrete historical cycle expresses and distinguishes itself through a characteristic complex of activity and consciousness: the culture's soul or style (Spengler, DW 1.174).

In addition to this sense of system, Pynchon and Spengler share an underlying vision of deterministic decay: from culture to civilization in Spengler's case, from differentiation to sameness in Pynchon's. Spengler appropriates organic metaphors—the cycle of the seasons or the life cycle of the individual human being—to substantiate his theory of the recurring decline of cultures throughout world history. Just as spring is followed by summer, autumn and winter; just as childhood gives way to youth, adulthood, old age and death, so, according to Spengler, what he calls Classical, Arabian and Occidental cultures have been born, have grown and flourished, and have finally decayed. In *V.* (1963) and *Gravity's Rainbow*, key words also include decline, fall and descent. Pynchon may make use of more complicated images drawn from the fields of medicine, Puritan theology and the natural sciences (ranging from chemistry and thermodynamics to calculus and ballistics) to dramatize modern civilization's encroaching doom. For both Pynchon and Spengler, however, stagnation and Caesarism are the ultimate phases and expressions of decline.

Both writers find in their diverse fields not only signs of how Western or Faustian civilization is following an established pattern but

also direct evidence of what is causing its downfall. Decline in each case is synonymous with progress: a falling away from innocence into routine, mechanization and chaos. In Pynchon's *V.* mechanization, the fall into inanimation, dominates. In *Gravity's Rainbow* the fall is measured by the ways Kekulé's benzene ring leads to the development of the Impolex G shroud: a product of nature which literally envelops and destroys nature, including man. (Both writers find the mythical key to their respective systems in the figure of Faust.) Pynchon and Spengler also share the conviction that there will be no apocalyptic end to modern civilization. On the contrary, increasing confusion and stagnation will cause it to go out with a quiet, ignoble whimper rather than a spectacular bang.⁴ (In *The Decline of the West*, eschatology and linear progress in history—with which Faustian man is obsessed—are mere illusions within one cycle of world history; they neither cause nor have any effect on the underlying structure.) Both Pynchon and Spengler also look back longingly to a golden age of pre-lapsarian innocence, which both nevertheless recognize as unattainable because of man's very progress in the direction of civilization.

Insofar as they share this overarching vision, Spengler and Pynchon have strengths in common: the potential to synthesize vast fields of complex and diverse information, to perceive structures within chaos (and vice versa), and to facilitate explanation and prediction. In addition, however, in those very strengths lie common weaknesses: a tendency to interpret information as evidence, to surrender to the pleasures of system, and to embrace paranoid and fatalistic beliefs whose bases leave very little room for either individual initiative or collective hope. Perhaps the most regularly-lamented limitation shared by Spengler and Pynchon is, indeed, that so little room is left for hope in their works. To the question "is this the way out?" asked at the very beginning of *Gravity's Rainbow*, the answer soon follows: "No, this is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive *knotting into*" (3).

A vision of hopelessness does not necessarily constitute a weakness in itself. (Such an estimation is inseparably linked to personal opinions and may say more about them than about forces and deficiencies in the presentation of the vision itself.) The main problem lies in the basis for that vision. In both Spengler and Pynchon, the decline of civilization is related more or less overtly to biology or the nature of matter itself. For Spengler, the process is a function of phylogenetics, nature or some other ineluctable factor. According to this view, human beings are doomed not because of personal failure but because they are destined to contribute *en masse* to larger suicidal structures. The view may be equated with the Puritan belief in the fallen nature of the material world and the necessary damnation of all

but the Elect. In this regard, the only difference between Spengler and Pynchon is that, in Pynchon's work, apocalypse as a relief from the menacing, omnipresent system his texts conjure up so well cannot even be forcibly precipitated. In Pynchon's vision—and this is partly what makes his hopelessness so hard to swallow—there are ultimately no Elect. In the face of the entropic, we all seem preterite and doomed; the Day of Judgement will not save even a chosen few.

Challenging dominant enlightenment beliefs in progress that results necessarily from human rationality and individual liberty, Pynchon entertains the notion not only that an underlying structure to all forms of existence guarantees decline but that, however one might interfere with that structure, the same ultimate decline is predestined. In a reversal of Heisenberg's principle, the more one interferes, the more certain the result; increasing uncertainty—a symptom not a cause of the decline—leads to a guaranteed end. In Pynchon's novels, scientists and engineers interfere with the natural world; not necessarily as a function of what they do, but simply because they do, the world edges closer to doom. Like Kekulé in *Gravity's Rainbow*, they do something forbidden which commits both us and themselves to an inescapable decline. More frightening still, opposite and seemingly incompatible actions in Pynchon's universe yield identical outcomes. In his quest for information and clarity in *Gravity's Rainbow*, for example, Tyrone Slothrop becomes entangled in strange marginal plots and disguises. The more clues he accumulates, the less of a clue he has. By getting involved, he blurs his own target and ends up in utter Heisenbergian uncertainty, wandering around in unpredictable patterns and undergoing successive transformations (and thus blurrings) of identity in the process (Carter, FF 35–36). Similarly, when Oedipa Maas tries to discover meaning within the borders of *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), meaning starts to disintegrate. People she has interacted with change, and like Slothrop she experiences both identity changes (becoming Arnold Snarb and Mrs. Edna Mosh [110–13, 139–40]) and also perhaps a loss of sanity. In each case, indeterminacy determines in the same way determinism does: one way or the other, all identities are surrendered.

Paradoxically, however, this same indeterminacy might just offer one way out. For if there is a hint at a solution in Pynchon, it probably lies in what he calls the excluded middle (CL 181): that which cannot be apprehended via Aristotelian logic, which lies beyond the dualistic plots of Puritan detective fiction, which evades the grasp of psychological modelling or business calculation, and which has more in common with principles of Heisenbergian uncertainty or wave/packet light theories than with the mechanics of Isaac Newton. Thus Roger

Mexico, the Anti-Pointsman in *Gravity's Rainbow*, is not the only character who questions the dualistic either-or not so much imposed by the binary logic of computers as perhaps (as in V. [293, 365–66]) built into man or, at the very least (as in *The Crying of Lot 49*), inculcated by “faceless pointsmen,” as if it is “bad shit” to walk between zeroes and ones (CL 104, 181). Oedipa may not have planted herself in this fertile middle ground when she fails to decide whether to believe or not to believe what she seems to have discovered. Yet the solution—simultaneously to believe and not to believe—would be comparable to Pynchon’s idea of incorporating opposites in the interests of reaching the same goal. While exposing our susceptibility to binary oppositions, Pynchon’s technique allows him to use them to his own ends rather than being controlled by them (as, for example, when junk becomes a sign not merely of stagnation and decay but also of fertility). He thereby avoids being traditionally categorical or easy to counter even as he builds his own rigid vision.⁵

If the notion of indeterminacy offers a theoretical basis for escape in Pynchon which seems denied to the subjects of Spengler’s vision, at the practical level the matter appears more complicated. If we look more closely at the agents of the respective systems, for example, it is in one sense Spengler’s, not Pynchon’s, world that retains a political space. Thus in *The Decline of the West*, the only effective and legitimate government is an aristocratic one. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, by contrast, aristocrats like Brigadier Pudding are pensioned off as no longer functional to the development of a greater universal dominion. There may be a tendency toward Caesarism in Pynchon’s world (for example, in the movement from Kekulé to Lyle Bland), with the elite (or what Pynchon refers to as “the Operation” [GR 616]) less Spenglerian defenders of cultural standards than agents of a totalitarian control system bent on suicide (“The Man has a branch office in each of our brains,” the narrator remarks toward the end of the novel [712]). But, ultimately, Caesarism derives not so much from the desires of any one individual (with Bland the Nietzschean *Herrenmensch*) as from the demands of the system itself. In another sense, however, Pynchon’s universe rather than Spengler’s retains at least the possibility of resistance. In Spengler’s most famous work, both the bourgeoisie and the masses are instruments and victims of their own fate. By contrast, in Pynchon’s writings—from his 1964 short story, “The Secret Integration” (rpt. SL 139–93), to his 1973 epic—innocence remains latent within the system in the shape of the silent and forgotten preterite (GR 76–77, 227, 533, 580–91, 712–13).

When we look at the nature of the system and the means by which it is either regenerated and sustained or destroyed, other (and perhaps

more significant) differences between Spengler and Pynchon accentuate the sense of structure latent in the latter's work. Spengler's emphasis on cultural morphology involves what H. Stuart Hughes describes as "an elaborate expansion of a metaphor drawn from biology" (153). History was not the same thing as nature, but it was "conceived, viewed and given form out of . . . nature" (Spengler, DW 1.6), with a consequent evasion of questions of power and process in favor of organicist assumptions and the language of destiny (Hughes 70). While himself suspecting and fearing such associations, Pynchon interrogates the relation between history and nature, and the assumptions and rhetorical strategies that describe it, in such a way that Spengler's schemes are at once engaged and deconstructed.

With regard to characterization, for example, on the one hand, Pynchon seems swept along by a Spenglerian sense of plot, creating in the figures of Pointsman and Blicero (among others) agents and victims of a pan-cultural destiny. On the other hand, however, he satirizes the very idea of such a universal structure, making the Pointsmans and Bliceros (and the world they seek to engineer) as absurd as they are malevolent. Lyle Bland and Brigadier Pudding, Duane Marvy and Franz Pökler: all incorporate aspects of a malign power structure; all simultaneously take the spell off it.

Pynchon's engagement with and deconstruction of Spengler's vision may also be illustrated through a brief discussion of cyclical actions in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Pynchon's cycles are not, it is true, the same as Spengler's. The latter typically cover thousand-year periods (with the cycle of Western or Faustian civilization reaching from the tenth to the twentieth century), while *Gravity's Rainbow* is concerned with the shift from an imperial to a totalitarian cycle (condensed as the "Oven State" and the "Rocket State," respectively) which would constitute phases within Spengler's Faustian cycle (Carter, FF 13-67). Both, however, engage issues of order and disorder, internal coherence and dissolution. This is nowhere more clearly implied than in the passages from Pynchon's fiction invoking the German chemist Friedrich August Kekulé von Stradonitz's famous benzene-ring dream:

Kekulé dreams the Great Serpent holding its own tail in its mouth, the dreaming Serpent which surrounds the World. But the meanness, the cynicism with which this dream is to be used. The Serpent that announces, "The World is a closed thing, cyclical, resonant, eternally-returning," is to be delivered into a system whose only aim is to *violate* the Cycle. Taking and not giving back, demanding that "productivity" and "earnings" keep on increasing with time, the System removing from the rest of the World these vast quantities of energy to keep its own tiny desperate fraction showing

a profit: and not only most of humanity—most of the World, animal, vegetable and mineral, is laid waste in the process. . . . [S]ooner or later [the System] must crash to its death, when its addiction to energy has become more than the rest of the World can supply, dragging with it innocent souls all along the chain of life. (GR 412)

As in Spengler, the Faustian spirit, the desire to subjugate the natural world, precipitates the Fall of Western civilization. But nature as resource never extends into nature as paradigm. The System seeks to violate nature's cycle. Where Spengler sees natural cycles, Pynchon's fiction implies unnatural ones. More specifically, if Pynchon's epic repeatedly edges into the fear that the freedom Sartre defines as "the irreducibility of the cultural order to the natural order" (152) may itself be fictional, that is because human beings may need it to be fictional.

Thus at both the opening and the closing of the totalitarian cycle in *Gravity's Rainbow*, not only human liberty but life itself is extinguished in the folds of Imipolex G, the ubiquitous "Peculiar Polymer" (699). As the Oven State collapses, Gottfried is enclosed within an Imipolex shroud before his ritual sacrifice (750–51); at the Rocket State's end, Richard M. Zhubb imagines himself being smothered by "a thin plastic . . . common dry-cleaning bag . . . floating in the air . . . wrap[ping] around my head, so superfine and transparent I don't know it's there really until too late. A plastic shroud" (756). In each case the same elaborate metaphor implies molecular chains restricting, indeed terminating, life. In each case, however, the molecular is neither the beginning nor the end of it. Gottfried surrenders to Dominus Blicero; Zhubb dreams of his smothering. Moreover, if Western man has been tempted into science and religion, has altered nature and has thus fallen, what is given birth to has less to do with nature than with productivity, earnings and the balance sheet. Between hydrocarbon permutations and the very plot of the universe lies a global business conspiracy, advanced by Lyle Bland and his associates, who have synthesized the lessons of Laszlo Jamf, the labor of thousands and the resources of state and finance to obtain political and economic power. While systemization may inhere in the very structure of nature itself, it is the way such potential may be used—may, indeed, be defined in the first place as potential—that matters.

For Pynchon, the Faustian temptation, the dream of assembling "new molecules . . . from the debris of the given," is crucial (GR 413). Parodying the Great Chain of Being as less natural order than death sentence, Kekulé's cosmic serpent tempts mankind into a knowledge and progress whose very potentials entrap. The revolution in chemistry opens the way to apparently infinite combinations, but it does so by

first defining nature as a system within which new combinations only further entropic stasis. Brought to life as a "screaming . . . across the sky" (3) and now "floating in the air," a seemingly universal polymorphic shroud stretches between Gottfried and Zhubb, at once accommodating and immobilizing. Within its folds, the victim reborn as savior of Blicero's deadly vision links up with the agent of power resigned to his own death; elite and preterite are forged in the Oven State's ashes. Delivered from ignorance, mankind is reduced to a flexibility whose very exercise serves only to limit its possibility.

An analogous enclosure molds Spengler's universe. If, in Pynchon's epic, men and women maneuver between the permutations of hydrocarbons and the workings of the Operation, in *The Decline of the West*, they maneuver within constraints imposed by destiny. They "have not the freedom to reach to this or that," says Spengler, "but the freedom to do the necessary or to do nothing" (DW 2.507). Their actions provide (in his words) the "modulations" within a predetermined "theme." Only chance, or what he sees as "incident," erodes the edge of fate (DW 1.145). In *Gravity's Rainbow*, theme and modulations likewise absorb virtually all energy. Dog Vanya may salivate uncontrollably, and Slothrop may escape briefly into the Zone. Both in an abstract and in a specific sense, however, the incidental remains as no more than a ghost in the controlling machinery. Its traces linger within the diminishing delta-t between rocket tip and theatre roof, and in the words of old William Slothrop's hymn, beyond which the novel is suspended; for the reader outside the text, they hover in the indeterminate delta-t beneath the rocket's arc. But if Pynchon scatters hints of some excluded middle outside the constraints of time and space, of class and nationality, whose continued existence alone holds the system at bay, in general his polymer chains afford no more room for individual liberty than do Spengler's metabiological cycles (Dray 110-12).

The endurance of the incidental, the non-systemized or excluded middle, a key concern throughout Pynchon's fiction, typically depends on a struggle for survival between the systemic and the random. The former renders Pynchon's characters at best mere ciphers and at worst subject to paranoia, insanity or suicide; the latter reduces them to anonymity and isolation. In *V.*, Herbert Stencil's quest for meaning yields a preoccupation with clues and hidden designs which give him purpose but also entrap. Benny Profane's random or accidental meanderings protect him from inanimation but leave him both disconnected from the territories he wanders and impervious to the people he meets. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pointsman is paralysed by his fears of disorder. Slothrop evades capture only by regularly adopting

new aliases and disguises. He survives at the expense of a progressive abstraction from the world of other men and women and a loss of identity and autonomy. Reduced to the status of human junk thrown overboard from the *Anubis* (named for an Egyptian god of death), where Thanatz roams (Thanatos being a Greek god of death) and where (according to Ensign Morituri [banner of those who are about to die]) Bianca has mysteriously disappeared, Slothrop is confined, Ancient-Mariner-like, to the edges of existence. At once dead and not dead, he is less destroyed than fragmented and scattered, his final manifestation a photograph on a record cover (GR 272–77, 473–92, 742).

The struggle for survival is complicated by the fear in Pynchon's work that the systemic and the random may both be expressions of the same entropic deterioration. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa becomes a latterday Maxwell's Demon, turning from kirsch and kitsch to history, psychology and religion to sort information in search of order. A vehicle of Pynchon's sense that humanity almost instinctively builds information into system and reads data as evidence, Oedipa creates and slowly becomes entrapped in webs of potential meaning. But if the detective procedures whose objective it is to identify or impose design draw her toward entropic oversystemization, her attempt to "drift . . . at random" (109) merely threatens isolation while doing nothing to dissuade her from the suspicion that she lies at the focal point of a plot whose origin is as obscure as its scope is limitless. Whether she acts as though outside the world whose potential order she seeks to account for or as though inside a world whose latent disorder she endures, Oedipa, part Stencil and part Profane, is at once agent and victim of the entropic. As she maneuvers across Southern California, she identifies local order only at the expense of general chaos (Carter, EC).

In *Gravity's Rainbow*, likewise, system and anti-system reinforce each other; diametrically opposed events and characters are part of a more abstracted plot. Ilse and Bianca are shadow- or movie-twins; Bianca and Gottfried are identical (they both lack color); Enzian and Gottfried are doubles; Tchitcherine and Enzian are brothers. Not only do all sooner or later intersect, actually or virtually, with both Slothrop and Weissmann/Blicero; they are also all connected to still other plots, subplots, chains, systems and counter-systems in the novel. Apollo and Dionysus, elite and preterite, force and counterforce: these and other dualities haunt the text, incorporating both the non-human and the extra-textual in their web. Thus the immortal Byron the Bulb appears to escape the Poisson life-span distribution curve light bulbs usually follow. But while he knows the corporate system which sustains the Poisson curve exists, he is unable to do anything about it. He dreams

of mobilizing the masses of ordinary light bulbs in an anti-corporate revolt, but fails (647–55). The very reading of the text encourages the detective mind's systematic bent into a search for clues and connections every bit as labyrinthine and interminable as those carried out by Slothrop in *Gravity's Rainbow* and (perhaps even more so) Oedipa in *The Crying of Lot 49*.⁶

In both Spengler and Pynchon, life cycles climax in death. But in *The Decline of the West*, the deterioration of a culture is seen in terms of the human ageing process and results in a death yielding nothing beyond itself. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, by contrast, death, or the suicidal, is linked to the erotic and is itself reproduced within and across cultural borders—often violently so. Both the contrast between Spengler and Pynchon and the connection between death and the erotic in *Gravity's Rainbow* are functions of other contrasts and connections. Thus whereas in *The Decline of the West*, ageing and death necessarily entail dissolution, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, sexuality is almost invariably associated with a loveless erection which reproduces and incorporates *pars pro toto* the Rocket State itself (Brown 128). As Enzian thinks of Blicero: “love, among these men, once past the simple feel and orgasming of it, had to do with masculine technologies. . . . Beyond simple steel erection, the Rocket was an entire system *won*, away from the feminine darkness, held against the entropies of lovable but scatterbrained Mother Nature” (GR 324). Where Spengler sees natural cycles which rise and fall, Pynchon implies unnatural ones in which organization and its entropic results are advanced, ironically, by the desire to avoid the fall, dissolution, the chaotic. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, the erotic seeks to violate nature's cycles. As in Tom Lehrer's song—“Once the rockets are up, / who cares where they come down? / That's not my department, / says Wernher von Braun” (43)—climactic explosion is divorced from death, the result being the reproduction of a suicidal system.

Death and the erotic are associated in much of Pynchon's fiction. After an emotionless love-making in “The Small Rain” (1959), Nathan “Lardass” Levine alludes to Freud: “‘In the midst of great death . . . the little death. . . . Ha. It sounds like a caption in *Life*. In the midst of *Life*. We are in death. Oh god’” (SL 50). During a similar scene in *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa and Metzger's sexual climax “coincide[s] with every light in the place, including the TV tube, suddenly going out, dead, black” (42). In *Gravity's Rainbow*, death and sexuality are repeatedly associated, especially via Imipolex G, the Rocket State's peculiarly reproductive organ. Thus Slothrop's childhood Imipolex conditioning makes his subsequent sexual life an instrument of death in the form of V-2 rocket hits. The *Mittelwerke* in which the rockets are constructed

resembles polymerized indole molecules of Imipolex G. Its main tunnels are shaped like an SS-sign, lovers asleep (Katje and others form a double-S shape), a double integral (key to the rockets' targets), or, with their forty-four cross-tunnels, DNA. Major Marvy, who loses his own means of reproduction when mistaken for Slothrop, sings rocket limericks which link sex and procreation to machines and destruction. Violence and the erotic are also joined via the figure of Margherita ("Greta") Erdmann, who is in turn connected to both Imipolex G and Blicero. Both Bianca, Erdmann's daughter, and Ilse Pökler, her shadow-child, suffer abuse (including sexual abuse, direct or indirect) by agents of the rocket industry before dying or drifting away.

In *The Crying of Lot 49*, a dead man, Pierce Inverarity, provides what Pynchon calls the "linking feature" (121) or integral element in the novel's multiple plottings and projections. Through him, Oedipa pierces or peers into (and through) variety in search of design. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, everything comes together through the Imipolexed rocket 00000. Thus the spirit of German rocket engineer Wernher Von Braun makes Slothrop and Geli ("jelly," sperm, or "come") Tripping reach sexual climax simultaneously (294). Communication and communion come about through the rocket. At the beginning of the novel, "a screaming comes across the sky" in the shape of the overtly-sexually loaded rocket; at the end, the rocket reaches the roof of the Orpheus Theatre with a "[come n]ow everybody" (760). When all the passengers on board the *Anubis* come together in response to Bianca's pain (466–68), they are united in death with both Gottfried—whose enclosure within the Imipolex shroud is completed with the phrase "Come, wake" (754)—and the cinema audience below the rocket. Since the rocket may come down anywhere, the audience incorporates everyone. Parodying Joyce's "Here Comes Everybody," "come" replaces "go" in the Tom Lehrer moment: "We will all go together when we go" (Lehrer 47).

If *Gravity's Rainbow* associates death, the erotic and Imipolex G as a central complex in the Rocket State's progressive incorporation, the key to the reproduction process is given in *The Crying of Lot 49*. Seduced by the prospect of security within the labyrinthine webs of Trystero, into which she has steadily incorporated herself, Oedipa dreams of an act of surrender to a "death-wish that can be consummated by some minimum gesture. She touched the edge of its voluptuous field, knowing it would be lovely beyond dreams simply to submit to it; that not gravity's pull, laws of ballistics, feral ravening, promised more delight" (118). Enacting the meaning of Gertrude Stein's remark that "the trouble with organization is it's just like perfection: the more you have, the more you want" (qtd. in Mottram 171), Oedipa

stands at what for the 00000 in *Gravity's Rainbow* would be the *brennschluss* point: the point at which rocket, fuel and telemetry (for which there is human responsibility) yield to the influence of the gravitational field, where, to return to Sartre's terms, the cultural order gives way to the natural. "*Won*, away from the feminine darkness, held against the entropies of lovable but scatterbrained Mother Nature," the rocket promises security and innocence; in its erection, it encloses its occupants in dreams of staticity without terror. By the time the terror comes, it is too late; what one might call the return of the compressed has become second nature:

[A]t Brennschluss it is done—the Rocket's purely feminine counterpart, the zero point at the center of its target, has submitted. All the rest will happen according to laws of ballistics. The Rocket is helpless in it. Something else has taken over. Something beyond what was designed in. (GR 223)

Katje Borgesius understands the rocket's "great airless arc as a clear allusion to certain secret lusts that drive the planet and herself, and Those who use her—over its peak and down, plunging, burning, toward a terminal orgasm" (223). But what those secret lusts are, what the precise status of the something that takes over is, and thus what may bridge the gap between the cultural and the natural order are matters left hanging, like the rocket, in the air.

Left open to question, too, is the possibility of another way out. In both *The Decline of the West* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, prospects of deliverance are radically constricted. To Spengler, there is only "the freedom to do the necessary or to do nothing." Destiny leaves little room for the incidental. To Pynchon, likewise, the excluded middle is, as the term suggests, defined by its absence, surviving only in the margins of time itself. As the rocket heads toward the Orpheus Theatre, wrapping beneath its parabolic shroud the world's population, *Gravity's Rainbow* seems to capture much of the feeling of deterministic hopelessness of *The Decline of the West*. Only the sense that Pynchon's Rocket State is constructed from the earth as resource whereas Spengler's Faustian culture is a natural outgrowth of the earth as seedbed appears to offer room for hope.

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Notes

¹The status of scientific method has more recently been challenged in Paul Feyerabend's *Against Method* (1975), which was, however, published after *Gravity's Rainbow*.

²H. Stuart Hughes is one of the few scholars to have written about Spengler during the post-1945 era of prosperity. His study devotes an entire chapter to Spengler's attitude toward the Nazis, revealing the differences between them and thereby rectifying a common misunderstanding.

³To Spengler, wars which spring from Caesarism spell the beginning of the end. Toynbee, in the essay "Does History Repeat Itself?" in his *Civilization on Trial*, is more positive. He argues that, if peaceful negotiations between East and West were to fail at the United Nations, blood might, unfortunately, have to be spilt—as it was in the classical era—to secure a new *Pax Romana* and establish a universal government. To Spengler, wars and "big personalities" are destined to occur "at the decisive points" in Western history (DW 1.145); wars and strong leaders are therefore not (as in Toynbee) a "way out" or "disentanglement from," but a sign of further "knotting into" (GR 3) the inevitable design Spengler delineates.

⁴The ending of *Gravity's Rainbow* may suggest that a spectacular bang is precisely what Pynchon anticipates as the end of Western civilization. Yet while the specter of explosion looms ever greater in the novel, the ultimate explosion itself never happens.

⁵The idea that opposite actions may yield identical ends is discussed with respect to one of Pynchon's early short stories in Redfield and Hays.

⁶On the experience of reading Pynchon's epic, see David Leverenz.

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