

# No Either/Or: The Stagnation of Forces in Pynchon's Universe: Ethical and Gender Undecidability in Two Spanish Cases

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Throughout the pages of his literary universe, Thomas Pynchon has frequently shown a meticulous interest in the notion of entropy. Many papers have been written on the subject. Elsewhere, I have stressed the authorial play, pervasive and ironic, on the binary constituted by “energy” and “entropy” that exists in what I defend as Pynchon’s evolving literary project (Collado Rodríguez 2004). Binaries—and energy/entropy is probably the most important one, because it refers directly to our condition of mortality—are always categorical, and even if we are aware of them, we cannot escape from their rule. Language, in the postmodernist sense, is our trap, a trap that produces social hierarchies by means of its categorical implications. Such implications, as many critics now understand, cannot be avoided, precisely because language is a tool also exposed to the arrow of time, that is to say, to the rule of entropy. When we talk, we do it *in* time, and therefore we have to choose our words—excluding the use of many other words—and produce our selected words one after the other, following the temporal line.

However, as my reading of Pynchon’s novels suggests, we can try to keep a certain ironic distance from the social implications that language always transmits or creates.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, with the advent of relativity theory and its cultural impact, the notions of energy and entropy had also forced their entrance into the discourse of the humanities and the social sciences. Even a few years earlier, by the turn of the century, as readers of Pynchon’s fiction know, the American historian Henry Adams had already dramatized the search for energy (whether as Virgin or Dynamo) in a universe of forces threatened by entropy. In the second half of the twentieth century, Thomas Pynchon follows Adams’s intellectual quest in a parodic and postmodern vein where energy, which Adams roots in the mythic Spirit of Life, is reiteratively symbolized as a female principle frequently subjugated by a male entropic bond. Throughout his novels and short stories, Pynchon textualizes *energy* in different forms: it is spiritual and religious (Venus and

the Virgin), it is informational (messages and communication), it is cabalistic (anthropologist James Frazer's undefined zone between religion and science), it is scientific (mechanical, electrical, radioactive, and cosmic), it is literary (parody and intertextuality), and it is political (freedom and democracy). Meanwhile, *entropy* represents disorder, loss, or disjunction, and therefore poses a constant threat to the free flow of the manifestations of energy in the different textual symbols that Pynchon has used to represent the notion in his novels: political conspiracy, fascism, consumerism, or posthumanity.

However, Pynchon's complex texts are provocatively ambiguous. That is to say, by offering no clear conclusions and by being located in uncertain contexts, they also warn readers not to fall easy prey to binary thinking and to its corresponding categorical understanding of life. Not surprisingly, in the Pynchonian universe, entropy also manifests itself as debris, social rubbish, as the symbol that represents woman, the queer, the victim of the system, or the dark side that has never occupied the discursive center—a throne only reserved for the WASP. One of the main intertextual notions at the back of this anti-categorical strategy in Pynchon's fiction is, as some critics have pointed out, Jungian theory, especially the psychoanalyst's beliefs in what he denominated the archetypes of the Christian Divine Tetrarchy. The notion of a female energy at loose throughout human history reads in Pynchon's pages both as a positive and as a negative *anima*, a beautiful but terrifying siren or *nixie*. Meanwhile, dark male forces, hetero or homosexual drives, or hidden conspiracies emanating from the shadows of history continuously interrupt or deter the free flow of vital energy. However, in modernist Jungian terms, it is only by the combined intervention of female and male, *anima* and shadow, spirit and instincts, that the ultimate archetype of meaning or revelatory Logos can ever be attained. Furthermore, Jung himself insists that the *anima* is the female side conceived in the personality of all males, and that females also have a harmonizing male principle in them, the *animus* (Jung 24-31).

Nonetheless, postmodernist Pynchon suggests that if the male suffocates the female, the vital spirit or energy represented by the *anima* cannot flow, and entropy finally rules. Within the invisible author's complex universe, I intend to exemplify his symbolic play and disruption of the categorical binaries male/female and entropy/energy by addressing two specific but apparently very dissimilar Spanish elements respectively found in *The Crying of Lot 49* and in *Gravity's Rainbow*. They deal with the real-life painter Remedios Varo and with the Spanish Foreign Legion.

*The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) is Thomas Pynchon's second published novel but, within his fictional universe, this small book contains what we might call as the third chronological manifestation of the female energy represented by V.: first, we have the Lady V. of the eponymous first novel (1963), dealing with the early part of the twentieth century; secondly, her manifestation as the "V2" of the Second World War in *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973); thirdly, here the novelist

takes us to the mid-1960s, that is to say, to the period of the counterculture and Governor Ronald Reagan's California. It is then and there that the figure of the historical personage Remedios Varo adds many nuances to Oedipa's quest for final revelatory meaning. Remedios is itself a Spanish name traditionally given to girls to commemorate one of several manifestations of Mary in Christian iconography: the *Virgen de los Remedios* (Virgin of the Remedies). The name fits perfectly in Pynchon's universe and more so when we consider that even the family name of the Spanish painter, Varo, offered the writer an extra possibility to further his game of the capitalized V., the letter that—as suggested by Henry Adams in “The Dynamo and the Virgin”—symbolically stands for spiritual and physical energy in the writer's textual universe. Readers of Pynchon's first novel may remember that the narrator had left the first female embodiment of V., disguised as the Bad Priest, dead in Malta, paradoxically killed by a bomb dropped by the fascists she was working for. Energy, in the early post-war world of *Gravity's Rainbow*, has already become the force of the rocket that may take humans to the moon or destroy the whole planet, a clear categorical either/or trap; from the electricity generated by the dynamos, the Pynchonian text has moved to the rule of atomic energy and into the prelude of the Cold War. Energy in this third novel can have a clear positive application but it also exposes its darkest, most dangerous side. Therefore, it is worth analyzing the way Pynchon portrayed the condition of the symbolic V. in the story described in his second novel, a story set years later in the new period of hope brought about by the counterculture, the new feminisms, and the Civil Rights movement. Is Oedipa a representation of the 1960s revolutionary ethos? Is she a new manifestation of the female energy represented by the V. of Virgin?

At the beginning of *Lot 49*, Oedipa certainly looks like the embodiment of a weak female type of energy because the narrator describes her as a Republican housewife, fond of liquor and subject to the neo-religious surveillance of the dead eye of the TV tube. In those early moments of the story, her weakness and emotional stagnation are obvious, as she had herself realized when she viewed Varo's triptych *Bordando el manto terrestre*, a cultural icon that comes into the fictional territory of the novel from the world of factual life. Oedipa sees herself reflected in the girl in the pictures, a figure who apparently is a reflection of the real painter [Virgen de los] Remedios Varo. If we associate the protagonist's sociological description in the first page of the book to Pynchon's use of Adams's metaphor of the principle of life as female energy, it follows that the modernist tower of solipsism—in which both Oedipa and the painted girl/Virgin of the Remedies are enclosed—symbolizes the element of entropic stagnation in the protagonist's life, her lack of mobility, and her necessity to break out and, by so doing, bring about the regeneration of life.

Such necessity for free energy flow motivates Oedipa's quest, manifested in a series of adventures that will transform her explicitly into the Virgin of the

Pietà (87) and, eventually, into the new womb for Pentecostal revelation at the end of the book, if she can ever escape from the trap of textuality. From a Jungian perspective, both the Virgin in the context of Christian religion and Oedipa in the fictional world of the novel, are representations of the *anima*, the female principle trapped by the status quo but expecting to be released. Meanwhile, Hernando Joaquin Tristero, also of Spanish stock—and the alleged founder of the dark non-official postal system of the Tristero—represents, together with Pierce Inverarity, the fictional adaptation of a male Jungian *shadow* (Jung 20-23). This archetype is a primordial source of instinctual energy symbolized by Satan in Jung's writings on the Christian Divine Tetrarchy. Correspondingly, in *Lot 49*, the shadow comes from the pre-consumerist past symbolized by Tristero and his organization, but also from the world of dreams manifested in Pierce's interruption of Oedipa's sleep, as reported almost at the beginning of the story, when the protagonist's former lover explicitly tells her through the phone, using one of his many parodic "tongues," that he is the Shadow (6), the hero of a popular radio serial and comic strip.

From a Jungian perspective, though, this complex amount of apparent male "negative" energy represented by the shadow needs to be assimilated and re-conducted by the heroine in order to reach the expected revelation that might bring about the release of her contained vital energy, that is to say, the revelation in the form of a new(born) life.<sup>1</sup> It should be stressed here that, as happens to the *anima*, in Jungian terms, the shadow is a principle which is negative and positive at one and the same time, in open contradiction with Aristotle's categorical Law of the Excluded Middle. The assimilation of this apparently evil principle is basic for Oedipa's understanding of her own role as Virgin and defender of the marginal human preterite.

In fact, in *Lot 49* textual connections between Jungian criticism and Oedipa's pre-ordered mythic path of regeneration are sometimes presented explicitly. After dealing with the archetype of the *anima* in his influential essay "The Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious," Jung discusses the symbol of the old sage or benevolent old man who, in his views, represents the archetype of *meaning*. This principle, Jung writes, is "like the *anima*, an immortal *daemon* that *pierces* the chaotic darkness of brute life with the light of meaning" (37, emphasis added). Readers may notice that the passage recalls the name of the shadowy Pierce, and realize the fact that it is his decision to name Oedipa executrix of his estates that compels the heroine towards her modernist-parodic adventure for self-recognition. The Jungian shadow compels her along a sustained quest for meaning, "yo-yoing" up and down the State of California, where Oedipa steadily tries to *pierce* the dark chaotic forces of Tristero.

While so doing, (narcissistically) following the reflection of the girl in *Bordando el Manto Terrestre*, Pynchon's protagonist looks for a male

counterpart, a knight of deliverance or Jungian *animus* that may help her come to the understanding of a final meaning. In one of her adventures, she actually has to deal with a *daemon*—as announced by Jung in the passage above: Maxwell's. It should be noted here that the real Scottish scientist Clerk Maxwell, in devising his demon, formulated a hypothetical way out (or escape) of the rule of entropy or thermodynamic death by facilitating an ordering, within the chaotic behavior of the molecules, according to their temperature. That is to say, Maxwell intended, from a Jungian perspective, to replace "the chaotic darkness of brute life with the light of meaning," which is what Oedipa systematically tries to do throughout her quest till she finally realizes that "excluded middles [. . .] were bad shit" (125).

We can harness Jung's well-known essay, "The Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious," to throw some more light on Pynchon's difficult novel from a modernist-anthropological angle through his definition of the archetype that stands closest to his notion of the revelation of the power of life. The anti-categorical position of the famous psychoanalyst is obvious in the following passage, as is his updated perspective on the human capacity to impose an interpretation on life and even his glimpse at the dynamics of universal chaos:

When you come to think about it, nothing has any meaning, for when there was nobody to think, there was nobody to interpret what happened. Interpretations are only for those who don't understand; it is only the things we don't understand that have any meaning. Man woke up in a world he did not understand, and that is why he tries to interpret it. *Thus the anima and life itself are meaningless in so far as they offer no interpretation.* Yet they have a nature that can be interpreted, for *in all chaos there is a cosmos, in all disorder a secret order*, in all caprice a fixed law, for everything that works is grounded on its opposite. (31, emphasis added)

Once again, Oedipa reflects, in her adventures, on the quest for the sense of life that Jung associated with the process of revelation that he denominated the "integration of the personality." However, there are some other layers of significance in the protagonist's quest for meaning and for imposing order on the apparent chaos of life. Once more, Pynchon makes use of ambiguity to complicate the reader's apprehension of any final single meaning and to expand Oedipa's adventure to its political implications. Revelation is never granted in the world external to her mind, that is to say, outside the tower of solipsism of her previous life that—evoking Varo's girl in the picture—she escapes when leaving home. But in her adventure Oedipa is forced to visit the dispossessed—metaphorically the margins of society—and finally encounter the old sailor, that transforms her symbolically into the new Virgin of the Pietà. Facing the ancient mariner, Oedipa

was overcome all at once by a need to touch him, as if she could not believe in him,

or would not remember him, without it. Exhausted, hardly knowing what she was doing, she came the last three steps and sat, took the man in her arms, actually held him, gazing out of her smudged eyes down the stairs, back into the morning. She felt wetness against her breasts and saw that he was crying again. (87)

As the narrator explicitly suggests, there is also the possibility that she might be pregnant.<sup>2</sup> However, at the end of the book, readers cannot be sure of what might be revealed to her in the auction, or metaphorical Final Judgment, because the novel ends right at its very beginning, repeating the words of its title: The crying of lot 49. In other words, neither Oedipa nor the readers can advance beyond the threshold of the forty-nine and into the fifty of revelation, into the announcement of the Pentecost or apocalyptic Second Coming. The protagonist, together with the narrator and the readers, are all textually trapped by many undecidable moments, lost in a written labyrinth that pervasively suggests that there is an order underneath its apparent chaos, while at the same time affirming that, through the trap of language, seven times seven is all we can aspire to have. Such a suggestion is what probably impels readers and critics to read *Lot 49* again and again and to impose on young students all over the world the task of dealing with Pynchon's little novel and its heroine, the Anglo-Saxon bourgeois housewife who attempts her escape from Varo's solipsistic tower and becomes a Virgin of the Remedies for all of us, a symbolic positive representation of the energy of life itself.

Within the more expanded literary zones of *Gravity's Rainbow*—whose story, let us remember, chronologically represents the second manifestation of V. in the twentieth century—readers may also recognize the importance of one of the most powerful motifs in the novel: the alternation of male and female figures that play different parts in the transgressed binaries energy/entropy, male/female, good/evil, and anima/shadow. In one of these symbolic manifestations, one of the male characters, Brigadier Pudding, briefly refers to the hymn of the Spanish Foreign Legion, a song called “El novio de la Muerte”—literarily *the bridegroom of Death*. Pudding does so when remembering a real historical event in which, readers might guess, he could have taken part as one of the members of the International Brigades who came to help the Spanish Republic in her fight against the fascist troops commanded by General Francisco Franco. However, readers may be misled here because the real event of the Spanish Civil War that Pudding refers to is the battle for the city of Badajoz in Extremadura, an episode that took place in August 1936, only a few days after Franco and other Army generals started their rebellion against the Spanish Republic. The rebellion started on July 17<sup>th</sup>, that is to say, when the International Brigades had not yet been created. Actually, the first of the International Brigades was not formed until October 1936. Furthermore, the XV Brigade, which agglutinated volunteers

from Great Britain and North America, was not founded until February 1937. Notwithstanding this misleading chronology, there are other historical reasons that perfectly fit in the context of Pynchon's book.

At the moment in the novel when the Brigadier makes the comment on Badajoz, he is paying a sexual masochistic visit a woman he names as his "Mistress of the Night"—the female counterpart of the Lord of the Night. This mistress is none other than Katje, a V-2 spy and later operative for the White Visitation who becomes, in Pynchon's third novel, one of the most obvious representations of the uncertain and undecidable figure of the Jungian anima. This is Pudding's reference, ambiguously presented by the narrator in free indirect discourse before the Brigadier refers to his own memories:

Here is his worst moment. She has refused him before. His memories of the Salient do not interest her. She doesn't seem to care for mass slaughter as much as for myth, and personal terror . . . but please . . . please let her accept. . . .

"At Badajoz," whispering humbly, "during the war in Spain . . . a bandera of Franco's Legion advanced on the city, singing their regimental hymn. They sang of the bride they had taken. It was you, Mistress: they-they were proclaiming you as their bride. . . ." (234)

Some historical information may help readers clarify Pudding's recollection. Actually, as reflected in the narrator's words, history books refer to the battle for Badajoz as a combination of myth and massacre. One of Franco's aides, Lt. Colonel Yagüe, marched against the Republican-loyalist Extremean city with a column—later baptized as "the column of death"—integrated by a regiment or *bandera* of the Spanish Foreign Legion and by a battalion of *regulares* or Moorish troops from North Africa.

Even if, from a historical perspective, the presence of Pudding at such an early battle of the Spanish Civil War could be considered unlikely, it seems clear that Pynchon knew about Badajoz and the massacre that Franco's legionnaires and Moorish troops carried out once they took the city from its Republican defendants. Both legends and history books agree on the fact that at least several hundred, perhaps up to four thousand civilians and prisoners of war were massacred by Lt. Colonel Yagüe's troops by the walls of the cemetery and in the Badajoz bullring. Some apparent witnesses maintained that prisoners were killed the way bulls are in the Spanish national sport.<sup>3</sup> Some (questionable) records allude even to the existence of a musical band that played the typical Spanish *pasodoble* songs while Franco's soldiers were slaughtering people with their bayonets, in a way that clearly emulates the matador's killing of the powerful bull.<sup>4</sup> Pynchon's minor reference to the event is, therefore, quite appropriate within the ideological and historical context of *Gravity's Rainbow* and, more specifically, of the chapter in which Pudding mentions the battle.

The martial hymn that the British Brigadier mentions is even now considered to be characteristic of Spanish patriarchal patriotism, as it officially stands as the hymn, not only of that particular regiment of the Legión that participated in the battle for Badajoz, as Pudding says, but also, the hymn actually represents the whole military corps. The Spanish Legion is a tough unit created early in the twentieth century to fight against the natives in the colonial wars of North Africa. Readers of Pynchon's first novel, *V.*, will not miss the colonial link. There is also an aspect in Pynchon's third novel which is most relevant for many Spaniards: the Foreign Legion was a very active military force in supporting Franco's rebellion against the Spanish Republic and his subsequent dictatorial regime. In fact, the would-be Generalissimo was for some years a close friend of General Millán Astray, the actual founder of the Spanish Foreign corps. The future dictator cooperated with Astray in the creation of the Legion in 1920, and three years later, although still only a major, Franco became the commanding officer of the African corps. When the Civil War broke out in July 1936, the Spanish Foreign Legion had already fought in a number of African battles and was considered to be the toughest unit in the whole Spanish Army. They immediately became fully loyal to Franco and to the other rebel generals, supporting the military insurrection by landing with Franco in the Peninsula from their quarters in North Africa and the Canary Islands, together with several battalions of *regulares* or Moorish troops. The reference to the anthem of the Legion is, then, again very appropriate within the historical context portrayed in Pynchon's novel because, in a sense, the Spanish Legionnaires were in the Civil War the equivalent of the German SS in the Second World War, on account both of their bravery and their cruelty.

Furthermore, Pynchon's allusion to *the bridegroom of Death* also fits in with the double-faced sexual and Jungian parameters of the story. In the hymn, the male voice of a legionnaire boasts about being the bridegroom of a female Death—because, in Spanish, Death is always female. The voice of the soldier also affirms that he is ready to join her in matrimony, that is to say, to dissolve in the final entropic condition of human mortality. The issue, of course, offers an element of anticipation within the context of the novel's entropic pull, but also a reflective gender contrast with other well-known instances of the book in which the carrier of death is a sadistic male, his victim being a weak target: either an exploited female, or a homosexual lover or, as the case was in Badajoz, many innocent civilians and prisoners of war.

As careful readers of *Gravity's Rainbow* may recall, the fact that in English Death is often given the male gender is repeated several times in the book before Pudding takes us into Spanish folklore. Thus, soon in the narrative, the writer combines humorous literary parody with Slothrop's alleged Puritan ancestry to offer his readers some epitaphs such as the following:



Adieu my dear friends, I have come to this grave  
 Where Insatiate Death in *his* reaping hath brought me.  
 Till Christ rise again all His children to save,  
 I must lie, as His Word in the Scriptures hath taught me.

Or the plagiaristic words (from a poem by Emily Dickinson) dedicated to the protagonist's grandfather Frederick Slothrop, deceased in 1933:

Because I could not stop for Death  
 He kindly stopped for me

(27, emphasis added)

A male gender for death clearly helps in the Pynchonian demotion of Anglo-Saxon patriarchy, symbolically condensed in the abreaction of the Lord of the Night. This male mythological figure anticipates, on several occasions, the role of Katje as his counterpart, the Mistress of the Night in Pudding's submissive interpretation. In this way, the Brigadier's reference to the *novio de la Muerte*—the bridegroom of a female Death—confirms both Pynchon's use of the Jungian notion that archetypes are never one-sided, and the novelist's insistent ethical notion that, from the post-war world onwards, binaries cannot be taken at face value any more. Pudding, a high-ranking officer who fought in the First World War and is now in command of the White Visitation, chooses—falling into Pointsman's trap—to be subdued by a female figure who for him openly symbolizes death. However, readers know Katje to be at least a double-agent who can be a passive object of male sexual sadism or, as is the case here, a dominant female used by Pointsman to finally satisfy Pudding's coprophagic impulses, an obsession that eventually brings about the death of the old General due to intestinal problems. The feces he eats, from his Mistress of the Night, literarily infect Pudding's guts. Readers might infer that Pynchon condemns him to die in such an unusual way, so that symbolically the old soldier has to pay for his active support of the British colonial Empire. With Pudding dies the old colonial regime, at a moment in which information is explicitly becoming the new gold or Grail searched for by all the servants of the post-nuclear era.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast to Oedipa's archetypal role in the previous novel but still fulfilling her Jungian assignment, the actual role of Katje throughout the pages of *Gravity's Rainbow* is extremely complex as well as ethically undecidable, and she frequently appears as a victim of men but also as the terrifying incarnation of the female death or Mistress of the Night, a role that even Slothrop feels when making love to her:

He lies on top of her, sweating, taking great breaths, watching her face turned  $\frac{3}{4}$  away, not even a profile, but the terrible Face That is No Face, gone too

abstract, unreachable: the notch of eye socket, but never the labile eye, only the anonymous curve of cheek, convexity of mouth, a noseless mask of the Other Order of Being, of Katje's being—the lifeless non-face that is the only face of hers he really knows, or will ever remember. (222)

Katje is life and death in Slothrop's quest for the new Grail of information represented in the G of the plastic "Imipolex G," but also in Greta, Geli or Gottfried, carriers of another undecidable letter that, in the author's cabalistic literary universe compels us to go on looking at different faces of the same Jungian archetype, be it a "positive" Virgen de los Remedios or the "evil" entropic bride of the Spanish Foreign Legion.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to Jung, behind the "meaningful nonsense played out by the anima" lies the *archetype of meaning*, "just as the anima is the *archetype of life itself*" (32, emphasis added).

<sup>2</sup> "Waves of nausea, lasting five or ten minutes, would strike her at random, cause her deep misery, then nightmares, menstrual pains. One day she drove into LA, picked a doctor at random from the phone book, went to her, told her she thought she was pregnant. They arranged for tests. Oedipa gave her name as Grace Bortz and didn't show up for her next appointment" (118).

<sup>3</sup> In his influential book on the Spanish Civil War, Hugh Thomas refers to this possibility as totally untrue and argues that this interpretation of the massacre was invented by the Republican newspaper *La Voz de Madrid*: "Véase el reportaje de Jay Allen publicado el 30 de Agosto en el *Chicago Tribune*, reproducido por Robert Payne en *The Spanish Civil War*, Nueva York 1962, págs. 89-91. El 27 de octubre de 1936, en *La Voz de Madrid*, se publicó una versión completamente falsa de esta 'matanza', en la que se acusaba a Yagüe de haber organizado una fiesta en la que había fusilado a los prisioneros ante la flor y nata de la sociedad de Badajoz, y que tuvo efectos desastrosos, pues provocó represalias en Madrid" (Thomas 246).

<sup>4</sup> See Tenorio "Las matanzas de Badajoz", Espinosa *La columna de la muerte. El avance del ejército franquista de Sevilla a Badajoz*, and Calvo Trenado "La masacre de Badajoz por el ejército franquista en 1936."

<sup>5</sup> The shift from goods to information as the ultimate center of power is made explicit on some occasions in the novel, such as the moment in which Slothrop arrives in Zurich and goes to visit a Russian contact who offers him the possibility of buying a number of valuable things:

"First thing you have to understand is the way everything here is specialized. If it's watches, you go to one café. If it's women, you go to another. Furs are subdivided into Sable, Ermine, Mink, and Others. Same with dope: Stimulants, Depressants, Psychomimetics . . . What is it you're after?"

"Uh, information?" [ . . ]

A tragic sigh. "Information. What's wrong with dope and women? Is it any wonder the world's gone insane, with information come to be the only real medium of exchange?" (258)

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