

A Democratic Pynchon: Counterculture, Counterforce and Participatory Democracy

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A place without gurus monarchs leaders cops tax
collectors jails matriarchs patriarchs and all the other
galoots who in cahoots have made the earth a pile of
human bones under the feet of wolves.

Why don't we all go, the children shrieked.

—Ishmael Reed

The sheep are happier themselves, than under the
care of wolves.

—Thomas Jefferson

1. Slothrop, the Counterforce and the Sixties' Revolution

Toward the end of *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa Maas reflects on the America her involvement with Pierce Inverarity's will has revealed to her. Those on the margins, disenfranchised, include the kids in immobilized railroad cars listening to their mothers' pocket radios, the squatters living in makeshift lean-tos behind highway billboards and in junkyards, drifters speaking their American language "carefully, scholarly, as if they were in exile from somewhere else invisible yet congruent with the cheered land she lived in" (180). And Oedipa, as she wanders through the "hieroglyphic streets," finds herself likening it to "walking among matrices of a great digital computer, the zeroes and ones twinned above, hanging like balanced mobiles right and left" (181).¹

Oedipa's realization of these two separate Americas, what Pynchon will come to call in *Gravity's Rainbow* the Elect and the Preterite, reflects Pynchon's own concern with the economic and political class differences in a land where the "chances [were] once so good for diversity" (181). His critique of this exclusionary America reaches its most intense level in his portrayal of the not-so-neo-fascist Reagan era of *Vineland*, and, as that novel reveals, it is bound up inextricably with Pynchon's valorization of the egalitarian and democratically-based counterculture of the 1960s in the United States.

For the Pynchon of *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Vineland*, America once represented Europe's second chance, "a gift

from the invisible powers, a way of returning" (GR 722). However, Europe "refused" the gift. America, rather than representing the possibility for redemption from the European structures favoring death, instead proved a "message . . . continent-sized . . . the site for its Kingdom of Death." By implication, America itself, in furthering "the impulse to empire, the mission to propagate death" (722) in its political, military and economic imperialism, has also refused the possibility of grace which it might have embodied. As so many of Pynchon's critics have recognized, *Gravity's Rainbow* embodies a far-reaching cultural critique of the North Atlantic intellectual and secular history characterized by an idealist metaphysical tradition which subtends the narratives of power and control throughout that history. In this scheme, America stands as the "passed over" opportunity for redemption from that idealist cultural tradition, which Pynchon repeatedly associates with death and oppression.

In criticizing America's adoption of this European idealist tradition which continues to reproduce its death structures, Pynchon reveals the sixties' counterculture's expectation that America ought to be able to do better.² In *Gravity's Rainbow*, "Slothrop's Progress" provides us with both Pynchon's most thorough critique of the inherent divisiveness of America's Puritan heritage and his most devastating diagnosis of the sixties' counterculture's relative political shortcomings. The Slothropian connection to Puritan America makes explicit Pynchon's critique of the Puritanical roots of America, including economic exploitation and the inegalitarian Calvinist dichotomy of Elect/Preterite. In portraying Slothrop as a kind of anachronistic hippie zooming around the Zone of post-Second World War Europe, Pynchon also allows us to see the essential hedonism in much of the hippie counterculture of the late sixties which resulted, at least in part, from the ravages of the "mindless pleasures" so many of the less politically-committed countercultural "revolutionaries" participated in.

Pynchon introduces a major theme of *Gravity's Rainbow*, the Elect/Preterite dichotomy, early in the novel by way of Slothrop's Puritan ancestors, William, Constant, Variable, Isaiah and Frederick Slothrop. Constant, as well as the other "nine or ten generations" except for William, the very first, could see (and "not only with his heart") the "stone hand pointing out of the secular clouds," which represented for the Puritans the notion of Election (GR 27). Beginning as "fur traders, cordwainers, salters and smokers of bacon," in short, as settlers in the New Jerusalem, these early Slothrops learned the lesson of American Election which progressed from the religious piety of New World exceptionalism to a more secular and unholy trinity: "Shit, money and the Word, the three American truths, powering the American mobility"

(27, 28). The American ideology for these early settlers became the drive to "mine it out, work it, take all you can till it's gone then move on west, there's plenty more" (28), all in the name of progress and American individualism. This impulse to empire is so strong that the beautiful sunset Slothrop sees in the Zone would have represented to his American ancestors simply "a purity begging to be polluted . . . of course Empire took its way westward, what other way was there but into those virgin sunsets to penetrate and to foul" (214).

In this sense, the "great bright hand reaching out of the cloud" of the Puritans' vision becomes, in economic terms, the divinely sanctioned Invisible Hand of Adam Smith's laissez-faire economic theory, which Pynchon mentions only two pages after his discussion of the Puritans (30). The spiritual Elect of the early Puritans become transformed into the economically Elect of free-market capitalism, yet the terminology is so constructed that the *materiality* of spiritual success or Election becomes justification enough for the exploitation of resources in the name of progress. Similarly, the multinational cartels whose structure, as Walter Rathenau in *Gravity's Rainbow* observes [164-65], has grown out of the Nazis' bureaucratic, rationalized organizational structure find their sanction in the same idealist tradition which subtended German nationalism in the Second World War: thus the death structures of both systems—American laissez-faire economics and multinational capitalism—alike rely on the idealist narrative for sanction and self-justification.³

One of the problems with this Elect/Preterite dichotomy, from the American point of view, is that, while it allows for the notion of individualism and the material rewards of a Calvinist work ethic, it also happens to taint at its very source the notion of democracy. John Dewey, in *A Common Faith*, makes this very criticism of the religious notion of the chosen sheep and the passed-over goats:

It is impossible to ignore the fact that historic Christianity has been committed to a separation of sheep and goats; the saved and the lost; the elect and the mass. Spiritual aristocracy as well as laissez faire with respect to natural and human intervention, is deeply embedded in its traditions. Lip service—often more than lip service—has been given to the idea of the common brotherhood of all men. . . . I cannot understand how any realization of the democratic ideal as a vital moral and spiritual ideal in human affairs is possible without surrender of the conception of the basic division to which supernatural Christianity is committed. (84)

The social and cultural revolution Dewey saw as necessary for the realization of a participatory democracy in America rested, in part, on

the abolition of the Elect/Preterite dichotomy and its accompanying anti-democratic divisiveness. Similarly, the political thrust of the sixties' radical movement, of which *Gravity's Rainbow* is an exemplary literary text, is also bound up in this notion of a realization of the principles embodied in a democratic ideal, and the revolution necessary to achieve it. While little scholarship has yet attempted to trace Dewey's influence on sixties' radicalism in the United States, there is at least a passing recognition of his influence on SDS (Students for a Democratic Society), and radical manifestos like Al Haber, Tom Hayden and some sixty others' *Port Huron Statement* (1962), "a moral critique of American society—especially of racism, militarism, and citizen apathy—a compelling vision of a regenerated society, and a sketch of a strategy for moving forward" (Burns 57).

Yet Pynchon, writing with the benefit of hindsight in *Gravity's Rainbow* some years after Port Huron and the limited successes of myriad sixties' coalitions for change, also points to the weaknesses of the counterculture's radically democratic efforts as well as to its empathetic strengths, applauding and recommending the belief in community while critically examining the gravest shortcomings in the face of almost inconceivably powerful political and social institutions. He demonstrates these assets and liabilities through Slothrop's journey, and eventual disintegration, in the Zone, and through the efforts of the Counterforce.

Re-reading *Gravity's Rainbow* today with the benefit of critical distance, Eric Meyer argues, "it is possible to see . . . how much it is a product of its particular historical situation." For Meyer, the novel is "a novel of 'The '60s,'" not only because it is "about that now mythic period," but also because its many themes reflect the same "anxieties of an America At War both at home and abroad" (81). The novel's central character (if he can be called that), Slothrop, is unquestionably an anachronism, a hippie in the European Zone, smuggling hashish for Seaman Bodine (GR 370), smoking dope with Säure Bummer (365), watching Bodine, Albert Krypton and a nubile Red Cross volunteer snort cocaine in the back of an ambulance (599), and running into characters with names like "Geli Tripping." Any doubt about the anachronism of his identity ought to be dispelled by his affinity for the harmonica (622) and by "Richard M. Zhlub's" protestations regarding "'the irresponsible use of the harmonica'" outside the Orpheus Theater on Melrose (754). The harp's subversiveness places Slothrop among the characters like Steve Edelman who run around "in an unauthorized state of mind" (755) in the Nixon era.

We should distinguish, however, between the two factions of this counterculture in Pynchonian terms. In *Vineland*, Brock Vond's

streetwise chauffeur, Roscoe, distinguishes between the ten percent who are "for real, all right, and they're tough cookies, long hair and all," and the other ninety percent who are just "amateurs, consumers, short attention spans, out there for the thrills, pick up a chick, score some dope, nothing political" (270). Slothrop, as one representation of the counterculture, clearly falls into the second category. His preoccupation with "chicks" is well-established. And his encyclopedic familiarity with American pop culture (films, comic books, pop music) places him within the "consumer, short attention span" category. While his ancestral proclivity for texts does make him their perfect instrument to track down significant rocket information in the Zone, Slothrop's own motivation is much more personal than political from the very start: he simply wants to find out something about who he is, hoping that information might lead him to some kind of freedom. In this sense, in addition to representing a descendant of the first American Puritans and embodying a virtual repository of American pop culture, Slothrop represents much of the positive spirit of community, as well as the more negative hedonism, of the sixties' counterculture.

On the positive side, Slothrop's kindness and empathy, his willingness to share (not to mention his commitment to free love), reflect the communal spirit the now almost mythical hippie culture claimed to embody. One cannot help but be touched by Slothrop's teary-eyed reflections on the little girl in London who, after having been buried for two days in the rubble of a V-bomb strike, surfaces with the hopeful question, "Any gum, chum?" (GR 24). Similarly, his dancing with the waif amid the detritus of war on his way to Nordhausen reflects the same kind of empathetic and human compassion toward one's fellow travelers as was embodied in the sixties' flower power crusade (GR 282).

Slothrop in the Zone is an "easy mark" when he's got a pack of cigarettes, and many of the other dispossessed souls in the Zone mirror his willingness to share: "when somebody has food they share it—sometimes a batch of vodka if there's an army concentration nearby, the GI cans can be looted for all kinds of useful produce" (551). Similarly, after Slothrop plays Plechazunga, a young girl sneaks him out of town, and her mother, who can't give him anything else to wear instead of the pig suit because "all her husband's clothes have been traded for food at the Tauschzentrale," does find a couple of hard rolls to give him for later (572). Pynchon also emphasized this willingness to share in the face of adversity in "A Journey into the Mind of Watts": "the poverty of Watts makes it more likely that if you have pot or a little something else to spare you will want to turn a friend on, not sell it. Tomorrow, or when he can, your friend will return the favor" (80).

In all these examples, the preterite populations have been “reduced” to an egalitarian way of life by the abject poverty they all share. And this spirit of equality emerges as one of the most affirmative forms of human interaction in all Pynchon’s writing.

Just as, for Pynchon, this emphasis on community and empathetic sharing is one of the most positive aspects of the sixties’ counterculture, for Dewey, this concern with others’ welfare is prerequisite for a culture of democracy. Dewey’s conceptualization of the individual *begins* (as did SDS’s, decades later) with an Emersonian valuation of the individual’s “divine” power and worth. As Emerson described it in “Prospects”:

Every spirit builds itself a house; and beyond its house a world; and beyond its world a heaven. Know then, that the world exists for you. For you is the phenomenon perfect. What we are, that only can we see. All that Adam had, all that Caesar could, you have and can do. (36)

Emerson’s affirmation of the individual was echoed in the *Port Huron Statement*: “we regard *men* as infinitely precious and possessed of unfulfilled capacities for reason, freedom, and love” (6). Yet Dewey’s conceptualization of the individual is much more complex than Emerson’s. Dewey moves from a biological model of the individual as organism living within and reacting to a mutually active and reactive environment, and at the same time wishes to jettison a transcendent metaphysical source teleologically grounding human morality and ethics. His conception of the individual therefore deems any notion of a man or woman *qua* individual existing beyond culture or community incomplete. For Dewey, the most important element in the individual’s environment is the existence of *other individuals* (Westbrook 44). The human self is inherently social, so human sympathy and mutual respect are indispensable to a democratic culture (Westbrook 158). Morally as well, in a post-metaphysical democracy, the only way for an individual to cultivate moral judgment is to critically examine the effects of his/her actions on the other members of society. “Sympathy was the best ‘animating mold’ of moral judgment [in Dewey’s democracy] not because it had precedent over other impulses but because it furnished the best standpoint for evaluation” (Westbrook 414). As Dewey himself put it in *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics*, in capital letters to emphasize its importance:

IN THE REALIZATION OF INDIVIDUALITY THERE IS FOUND ALSO THE NEEDED REALIZATION OF SOME COMMUNITY OF PERSONS OF WHICH THE INDIVIDUAL IS A MEMBER; AND, CONVERSELY, THE AGENT WHO

DULY SATISFIES THE COMMUNITY IN WHICH HE SHARES, BY THAT SAME CONDUCT, SATISFIES HIMSELF. (EW 3:320)

Perhaps the best example *Gravity's Rainbow* provides of mutual give and take within a democratic culture is the "ad hoc arrangements" in the Zone as Geli Tripping describes them. Geli's example reflects, like Slothrop's own positive behavior, the best of the countercultural ideal of community through a personal concern for others. "Whether we analyze reality in terms of control and freedom or closure and openness, arrangements of this personal sort, freely entered upon, seem to be the modus vivendi treated most positively" in Pynchon's novel (Hume 125).

The first thing we notice about Geli is her innocence: "Nowhere in her eyes is there any sign of corrosion," as though she has lived somehow beyond the brutalities of the war and of the world (GR 290). She describes her relation with Tchitcherine as "'an arrangement.'" Because the Zone is so disorganized, she says, "'There have to be arrangements'" (290). She informs Slothrop that he'll find out for himself how these arrangements, these "temporary alliances, knit and undone" (291), are cropping up all over the Zone. And, of course, she is right: Slothrop does find "thousands of arrangements, for warmth, love, food, simple movement along roads, tracks and canals" (290). These arrangements are distinctly personal. According to the epigraph to a late section of the novel, "The dearest nation of all is one that will survive no longer than you and I, a common movement at the mercy of death and time: the ad hoc adventure" (706). And there is, too, an efficacy to these kinds of arrangements, even a magic to them, for Geli's arrangement with Tchitcherine eventually saves his life (734-35).

What perhaps is most interesting of all, for our purposes, is the similarity between the personal tone of these arrangements and the political possibilities a similar approach to anti-war activism raised for radical groups like the Resistance, founded in Palo Alto, California, by David Harris and Richard Sweeney in March, 1967. For the members of the Resistance, the most important means of raising consciousness about the Vietnam war (and about the necessity to become "criminal" draft evaders) was to talk to people one on one, or in small groups, and develop a personal intimacy absent from other kinds of political activism:

The summer and fall of 1967 Harris, Sweeney, and cohorts roamed the West Coast from San Diego to Seattle, searching out prospective non-cooperators, telling their story to small groups or one-on-one, and

explaining why they had chosen the role of "criminal." Sometimes they played music and smoked marijuana together. "Part of the process was creating a sense of intimacy between us which . . . we felt was the basis of our organization," Harris recalled. (Burns 78-79)

Far from an ineffective anti-war coalition, the Resistance found that, by planting the seeds for small Resistance groups in loose arrangements, they had begun a networked movement which sprouted similar groups across the United States. Leaderless (unlike SDS), the Resistance formulated an ad hoc national federation of draft resistance with no help from the media and no outside resources. Their efforts, similar in many ways to the loosely connected arrangements Geli describes, demonstrated that an emphasis on the personal dimension of the anti-war movement could, in Dewey's terms, benefit the community of anti-war radicals as well as the individual radical himself.

So, for the Resistance as well as for Dewey, and, arguably, for Pynchon too, at least some of the goals of a participatory democracy, and therefore the goal of sixties' radicalism, could be achieved in the spirit of collectivity, willingness to share resources, and mutual respect which the preterite display in the postwar Zone of *Gravity's Rainbow*. The open-handedness Slothrop and Geli exhibit represents this affirmative element of the sixties' movement in America.

However, as Dewey himself recognized, this necessary sympathy might easily be confused with a sentimentalism which placed more emphasis on the emotional dimension of sympathetic action than on the *results* to be gained by such action within a community (Westbrook 414). Although Geli is quite emotional, especially where Tchitcherine is concerned, she never loses sight of her overriding intention to protect her lover from harm. Slothrop's sentimentality, however, is less result-oriented than Geli's. And such directionless sentimentality constitutes, for Pynchon, one of the reasons for a majority of the counterculture's apolitical hedonism. In representing the hippie-ish Slothrop as simply "going with the flow," trying to find a way out of the repression he experiences from nearly all sides (family, SHAEF, PISCES, Tchitcherine, etc.), Pynchon implicitly criticizes the often directionless hedonism of the sixties' radical movement. In riding "their kind underground" through the Raketentstadt (GR 603), hoping it will yet lead him to freedom, Slothrop reflects too much of the "glozing neuter" (677) mentality of the hippies whose brains have been "ravaged by antisocial and mindless pleasures" (681).

As Slothrop slowly plucks and strips his "albatross of self," the one "ghost-feather" he continually passes over is the one that represents "America": "Poor asshole, he can't let her go" (623). Similarly, the

one coherent dream of the various factions of the sixties' counterculture was the dream of a participatory democracy, which embodied America for those radicals. Yet, by this time, Slothrop is reading omens in "patterns in the ashes of his fire . . . the guts of trout he's caught and cleaned, scraps of lost paper" (623). His occult, even pagan practices are reminiscent of the hippies in *The Armies of the Night* trying to exorcise the Pentagon (141-42), a scene Norman Mailer ascribes to the ravages of dope on the hippies' minds, perhaps another case of brains nearly destroyed by antisocial and mindless pleasures.

By the time Slothrop becomes a "crossroad" himself, during his strange apotheosis, or sparagmos, or disintegration, in which he sees the "stout rainbow cock" plunged into the "wet valleyed earth," he too is reduced to mindlessness: with not a thing in his head, "just feeling natural" (GR 626). While Slothrop's experience represents a kind of hippie nirvana, with its Wordsworthian romanticizing of aboriginal Nature, it also reduces him to a level of mindlessness which renders him useless to himself and to others—not a very effective mode for would-be revolutionaries.⁴ So, while *Gravity's Rainbow* (like other Pynchon texts) celebrates the human kindness and empathy that inform much of hippie culture, it also shows that peace, love and understanding, albeit they are the noblest ideals of human interaction in the novel, are insufficient without some alternative cultural paradigm of knowledge, organization and action to idealist Western culture's death structures as represented by the "They-system" of the establishment. We see this weakness in the sixties' movement clearly in the paradox of systems which the Counterforce exposes.

If Slothrop represents the less serious and not-so-politically-oriented ninety percent of the counterculture's constituency, the other, more politically-oriented ten percent find their analogue in *Gravity's Rainbow* among the Counterforce.⁵ Enzian, Katje, Pirate Prentice, Roger Mexico, Osbie Feel, Webley Silvernail, Blodgett Waxwing, Stephen Dodson-Truck—all eventually find themselves unlikely co-conspirators. One of the clearest expressions of the Counterforce's symbolic relevance is the "counterforce traveling song":

They've been sleeping on your shoulder,
 They've been crying in your beer,
 And They've sung you all Their sad lullabies,
 And you thought They wanted sympathy and
 didn't care for souls,
 And They never were about to put you wise.
 But I'm telling you today,
 That it ain't the only way,

And there's shit you won't be eating any more—
 They've been paying you to love it,
 But the time has come to shove it,
 And it isn't a resistance, it's a war.

. . .

Light one up before you mosey out that door,
 Once you cuddled 'em and kissed 'em,
 But we're bringin' down Their system,
 And it isn't a resistance, it's a war. . . . (639-40)

Although sardonic humor is evident in this passage, evident, too, is the unmistakable allusion to the protest songs of the sixties' revolution. What is more, the martial imagery reflects the radical notion, so clear, again, in Mailer's anti-war novel/history, *The Armies of the Night*, of the countercultural revolution as an almost military operation. As Mailer characterizes it, the "soldiers" of this revolution, like their revolutionary ancestors at Valley Forge, emerge as a rag-tag, disorganized crew of insurgents in motley (leaderless but for their dubious "General," Mailer himself). While Mailer has a bit of a joke at the "soldiers'" expense, he recognizes that beneath the holiday atmosphere of the 1967 march on Washington lies a tragic undercurrent of hopelessness in the revolutionaries' enterprise, "nightmares beneath the gaiety of [those] middle-class runaways, [those] Crusaders, going out to attack the hard core of technology land with less training than armies were once offered by a medieval assembly ground" (109).

In this observation, Mailer implicitly criticizes the radicals' efforts, as Reinhold Niebuhr, some thirty-five years earlier, criticized Dewey's weak-kneed, prewar politics: "Conflict is inevitable, and in this conflict power must be challenged by power" (Niebuhr xxiii). Dewey's early notion was that, because participatory democracy was the most just and fair form of governance yet developed by human beings in the course of history, certainly the power elites would eventually see reason and willingly acquiesce to the democratization of power. For Niebuhr, this conceptualization of democratic progressivism was blind to the fact that those in power would never *willingly* concede their power for any reason whatsoever. "One could not assume [as Dewey, in his ever-optimistic valuation of humanity, so often did in his early writings] that the masters would teach themselves the virtues of participatory democracy, nor could one expect the masters to permit the free development of cultural institutions and values subversive of their rule" (Westbrook 251).

In this sense, the naiveté of the early Dewey is reflected, to some extent at least, in the party atmosphere of Mailer's "army." While the radicals' motivations are noble, the very simplicity which characterizes their culture also emerges as one of their greatest tactical weaknesses. And, though members of the Counterforce in *Gravity's Rainbow* like to define themselves as, in Sir Stephen's words, "'a case-hardened lot'" (GR 545), which would seem to imply their superiority to naive and feeble demonstrations against the power Elite, the novel nonetheless demonstrates the relative futility of their effort. For, while their efforts are absolutely essential, there being no alternative to continuing to try to counteract Their system and power, the Counterforce's effort, like that of the committed radicals of the sixties' counterculture, is highly problematized, on the one hand, by their inability to conceive of an organizational alternative to the binary pair of Their rationalized systems, and, on the other hand, by a complete lack of structure and organization.

We see this telling criticism of the counterculture's project in the discussion between Pirate Prentice and Roger Mexico in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Mexico, on hearing Milton Gloaming's name, begins to denounce Pointsman and his self-serving machinations. Pirate interrupts him to say that Gloaming is operating under Counterforce direction, not Pointsman's. Pirate then tells Mexico that he is a "'novice paranoid,'" that he needs to understand the necessity for a fully-developed "'We-system'" to counteract the "'They-system'" they are all committed to fighting. "'Of course a well-developed They-system is necessary,'" he says, "'but it's only half the story. For every They there ought to be a We'" (638). Roger's assumption about Gloaming, therefore, is off base because it disrupts the "system," which, as Pirate makes clear, is all that matters:

"We don't have to worry about questions of real or unreal. They only talk out of expediency. It's the *system* that matters. How the data arrange themselves inside it. . . . Your idea that Pointsman sent Gloaming takes a wrong fork. Without any contrary set of delusions—delusions about ourselves, which I'm calling a We-system—the Gloaming idea might have been all right—" (638)

Thus Mexico's realization that Pirate and the Counterforce are "'playing Their game'" (638) is accurate. For the notion that the system itself takes precedence over "real or not real" is Their notion, and used to Their benefit. By adopting Their system-oriented mentality, the Counterforce buys into the idealist conceptualization of reality they are

so dedicated to fighting against. They do so to fight Them on Their own terms, yet to adopt Their method is to be coopted by the very powers they wish to bring down. That is to say, the Man has "busted the sod prairies of their brains," as Slothrop himself discovers, so that nothing of their own will grow there (210). Pynchon suggests here that the enculturated forms of organization and knowledge are such that the members of the Counterforce emulate Them in spite of their best efforts not to do so, because they fail to see any alternative to the rationalized structure/structureless chaos dichotomy which is Their domain.

Mexico is confused by this turn of the conversation, and cannot understand the logic of Prentice's argument: "It's a little bewildering—if this is a 'We-system,' why isn't it at least thoughtful enough to interlock in a reasonable way, like They-systems do?" Osbie Feel's answer brings us to the crux of the matter: "That's exactly it. . . . *They're* the rational ones. We piss on Their rational arrangements'" (638-39). This Counterforce notion is in keeping with much of the New Left's, and later other activist groups' and coalitions' desire to avoid the hierarchical, top-down management style of the Man. They wanted a more participatory organization which avoided the structures the Establishment used to maintain power. For organizations like SDS, top-down management, with its tendency toward star-making and sexist delegation of responsibility, contributed to their ultimate decline and eventual demise. Thus the Counterforce (like many of the sixties' revolutionary coalitions) moves from one extreme, the rigidified structures and system-oriented hierarchies of the Man, to the other extreme, a commitment to an almost total lack of organization and direction.

The sixties' revolution, comprising numerous radical factions, each with its own agenda, emphasized de-systematization (implicitly, because of the splintered and sometimes contradictory nature of the various factions' individual concerns, and explicitly, because of the desire not to imitate the rationalized structures of the Man) to the point that many efforts disintegrated because of the various coalitions' disorganization:

The heart of authentic radicalism is the expansion of democracy. During the 1960's activists lived out democratic ideals in every form imaginable, and without any form at all. For the most part it was the raw experience of democracy without institutionalization or, more important, theoretical articulation. Lenin once stated that a revolutionary movement needs a revolutionary theory; it is no less true that democratic movements need democratic theories. (Burns 187)

In fairness, part of the radical ideology (if it can be called that) of the sixties' counterculture was that mobilizing against the Man without any clear organization or single locus of power made it that much more difficult for the Man to squelch the movement. Mailer recognized this quite clearly:

The aesthetic of the New Left now therefore began with the notion that the authority could not comprehend nor contain nor finally manage to control any political action whose end was unknown. They could attack it, beat it, jail it, misrepresent it, and finally abuse it, but they could not feel a sense of victory because they could not understand a movement which inspired thousands to march without a coordinated plan. (105)

Here Mailer recognizes the strength of the movement's *ad hoc* nature, but also understands its lack of cohesion as a fatal weakness. His insight into similar schisms within the New Left enables him to foresee in 1968 why its project would fail, before SDS's last fiasco of a convention in 1969, which disintegrated in name-calling and recrimination because of the divisions Mailer so presciently diagnosed (Burns 182).

The political weakness of the Counterforce reflects Pynchon's similar critique of why the sixties' movement was, finally, so much less successful than it aspired to be. As a "Spokesman for the Counterforce" says, one of the Counterforce's "fatal weaknesses" was their lack of consensus on certain key matters—in this case, the role of Slothrop (GR 738). Such ambivalence may have reflected the openness and concern for democratic participation which the various radical movements of the sixties embraced, yet it also became one of the weaknesses which eventually led to the decline of such coalitions due to infighting and the idealist expectations of singular direction and purpose. This is the paradox Pynchon raises in the text: how can one effectively fight Them, the Establishment, without either having to adopt the very structures the Counterforce (that is, the counterculture) is determined to replace or bring down,⁶ or else adopting no system at all, and pissing on their rational structures? Pynchon's answer (suggested in the structure of the novel itself) is that the problem lies, not in the apparent paradox the Counterforce fails to come to terms with, but rather in the way the question itself has been formulated:

In *Gravity's Rainbow* . . . Pynchon takes ethicalness beyond content and uses it as a stylistic, linguistic, and structuring principle. Thus, grounds for affirmation occur not so much in *what* the book is about as in *how* Pynchon says what he says. In writing a narrative that keeps his readers

open to the difficulty of living in an indeterminate world and forging a nonprescriptive ethics, he provides a way for us to apprehend experientially the kind of truth . . . his books endorse. (Chambers 128)

2. *Gravity's Structure and Art as Experience*

Many constraints limited the efficacy of sixties' radical coalitions: tensions caused by structural conflicts within the organizations; problems with training leaders and accepting leadership, and with the media star-making that isolated leaders from their constituencies; increasing violence on the part of radicals frustrated with their own limited success; and even infiltration by government agencies like the FBI with its Cointelpro operations. All these factors contributed to limiting the radical groups (Burns 179-83). Yet Pynchon reveals in *Gravity's Rainbow* a much deeper, *culturally-encoded* response to structural indeterminacy which undermined the democratically-oriented groups and coalitions. In the Counterforce's inability to see beyond the false dichotomy of rational system versus anti-rational disconnectedness, Pynchon reveals the culturally-shaped limits on organizational structures and the expectations for closure they engender which helped to defeat such radical organizations even in the midst of their wonderful democratic experiment. "In raising the order/chaos antithesis, Pynchon encourages a habit of thinking that cannot tolerate the instability and complexity of multiple patterns of interrelation. All his books insist that this habit of thinking is analogous to conventional expectations of narrative coherence" (Hite 17).

Thus the very structure of Pynchon's novel reveals that, because the Counterforce has been conditioned to think in terms of binaries, of either/or, the choice of systems it encounters represents a false dichotomy. As we have seen, the quest for certainty Dewey excavates in Western thought and culture reveals a culturally-dominant conceptualization of knowledge which despises the kind of flux a democratic society or organization requires to flourish. Inculcated as the members of the Counterforce are with an idealist formulation of knowledge which always tends toward a static rather than a dynamic conceptualization of truth, the notion of an organizational structure which does not hang together conceptually and rationally fills those like Roger Mexico with the same dread Slothrop encounters when he gets a glimpse of "anti-paranoia," that state of disconnectedness "not many of us can bear for long" (GR 434).

The problem, then, with the Counterforce, as well as with the sixties' coalitions which attempted to function in an egalitarian, non-hierarchical manner, lies not so much with the headlessness of the

structure itself as with the way we have all been enculturated to respond to the indeterminacy such structures engender and to the flexibility they require. The disintegration of democratically-organized coalitions in the sixties was at least as much a product of this Western orientation toward rationalized, static structures or systems as a de facto result of an inherent weakness in the democratic structure per se. As Geli's experience demonstrates (and as real-life non-hierarchical movements like the Resistance's bear out), productive alliances within the indeterminate Zone are a viable means of organization and action, but only when the contingencies of such an indeterminate space as the Zone are accepted by the participants and incorporated into their *modus operandi*.

Gravity's Rainbow's very structure thus reveals, experientially, both the reader's Western preference for linear, rationalized systems (in this case, of discourse) and his or her ability to adapt to indeterminacy and make do with ad hoc arrangements of his or her own (with regard to meaning in the text) when faced with such openness and ambivalence. "Like Pynchon's heroes facing their fragmented cosmos, we learn to survive through flexibility and through not demanding too much control. We learn to accept uncertainty, make personal arrangements of local order, and go with the flow" (Hume 201). In form as well as in content, then, Pynchon's novel is the very kind of educative discourse Dewey insisted was necessary for the realization of a culture of participatory democracy. Its form demonstrates that we have the ability to live in the despised flux, and, moreover, that such indeterminacy invites an openness and freedom from the repressive, rationalized structures which three thousand years of culture have trained us to emulate and require.⁷ In content, the novel's continual elevation of the Preterite also recommends the democratic ideal which was the keystone of the radical revolution of the 1960s. Pynchon's critique of the sixties' revolution rests, therefore, not so much on the shortcomings of the radical organizations themselves, but rather on their constituents' understandable inability to break free of the idealist tradition and its concomitant expectations regarding rational closure and static truths, which are anathema to the inherently dynamic system of participatory democracy.

The ideological and political implications of *Gravity's Rainbow's* disconnected and indeterminate narrative style have received considerable critical recognition.⁸ Raymond A. Mazurek's notion that the novel's style reflects a kind of linguistic preterition in which no metaphor or thread of the story can be passed over points to the same democratic impulse in Pynchon's style that the content of his writing continually reveals (78). According to Brian McHale, "Reading

Gravity's Rainbow is good, if strenuous, training in negative capability" (82). McHale's troping of Keats suggests that Pynchon's novel requires its readers resist the culturally- and educationally-encoded impulse to find closure and meaning in the text, the impulse to consume the text and, in the words of James S. Hans, leave it "feeling as though [they have] completed the experience and can thus walk away from it with the illusion that [they have] spirited away another little nugget on [their] way to the final revelation" (280). Pynchon will not allow readers of *Gravity's Rainbow* to come to such a happy conclusion. The indeterminacy of the content and organizational structure of the novel reveals a messy, sometimes disconnected and discontinuous, incomplete and ontologically unstable world. And it is precisely this kind of world which Dewey believed was prerequisite for a culture of democracy.

In "Philosophy and Democracy," Dewey argued that in the common metaphysical (that is, idealist) conceptualization of the world, liberty was simply the freedom to "act in accord with the fixed laws of Being" (Westbrook 362). Because this idealist conceptualization of the world began with the assumption that "reality exists under the form of eternity," that it is "an all at once and forever affair" (MW 11:50), the first thing that had to be subverted for the concept of democracy to gain real legitimacy was the notion of idealist metaphysics itself. Such a closed, tight, universal conceptualization of reality precluded any possible democracy, because it removed from possibility the very melioristic flexibility a creative democratic culture required to flourish.⁹ Democracy needed a world like the one Dewey described in *Experience and Nature*: "a universe in which there is real uncertainty and contingency, a world which is not all in, and never will be, a world which in some respect is incomplete and in the making, and which in these respects may be made this way or that according as men judge, prize, love and labor" (qtd. in Westbrook 362).

Only in such a world could individuals make affirmative use of what Dewey believed was the driving force behind a democratic culture, the existence of conflict and dissensus, because only in such a non-idealized "pluriverse" could such conflict and dissensus exist. Whereas the presence of these potentially divisive elements seemed to be one of the causes of disunity and disintegration among the democratically-oriented coalitions of the sixties, Dewey believed that, if only their presence was harnessed, they held the potential for unlimited energy and potentially ameliorative change within a democratic culture. In his view, the kind of "disequilibrium" which would later help lead to the downfall of the sixties' coalitions was, viewed rightly, a tremendous opportunity for growth (Westbrook 391). The conflicts individuals

and/or societies suffered through were, for Dewey, both inevitable and, finally, positive in at least two ways. First, their occurrence and eventual resolution reinforced the notion that the world is changeable and therefore progressively improvable. Second, the moment of conflict resolution (always a temporary state, for future conflict was still inevitable) constituted, for Dewey, life at its most passionate and joyful intensity. However, under the popular metaphysical dispensation, such possibility for meliorism was impossible, for the notion of an open pluriverse ran counter to the essentially Platonic conceptualization of a static and eternally-defined universe. Therefore, in representing the world of *Gravity's Rainbow* as discontinuous and indeterminate through the vehicle of a fragmented, postmodern narrative style, Pynchon allows the reader to *experience* the kind of non-idealist pluriverse Dewey (and William James before him) advocated as essential (metaphysically) for the concept of creative and participatory democracy to be meaningful. This very notion of art as an experience derives (in one permutation, at least) from Dewey's own aesthetic outlined in *Art as Experience*.

Dewey's aesthetic begins (as does most, if not all, of his philosophy) with his notion of experience. "The first great consideration is that life goes on in an environment; not merely *in* it but because of it, through interaction with it. . . . [T]he career and destiny of a living creature are bound up with its interchanges with its environment, not externally but in the most intimate way" (AE 13). This rudimentary form of experience is the basis for the individual "organism's" survival and, in the case of humans, sentient understanding. More to the point, it also "provides the basis for intelligence, meaning, and the consummatory or appreciative phase of experience," which should be seen as having a "broadening and deepening" effect on both the individual's understanding and his community's (Alexander 127). This enriching effect of experience is found most readily in the aesthetic experience, particularly in the literary transaction, Dewey's most valued sort of aesthetic experience.

Dewey's literary aesthetic finds its most cogent application in the transactional reading theory of Louise Rosenblatt. Recognized by many literary critics as the single-handed founder of reader-response criticism, Rosenblatt based her transactional theory on the pragmatic notion of experience within an environment. When the reading act is considered within the pragmatist conception of experience, then "the text becomes the element of the environment to which the reader responds" (RTP 18). As with any experience, the reader brings to bear on it many previous experiences (through memory) which assist in making sense of and categorizing the present experience. Within the

literary transaction between reader and text, therefore, these previous experiences which provide a suitable frame of reference assist the reader in "the process of anticipation and retrospection that leads to the formation of the virtual dimension, which transforms the text into an experience for the reader" (Iser 56). In this way, the reader of *Gravity's Rainbow* can actually experience the kind of culture or environment most amenable to Dewey's democratically-oriented metaphysics. That reader finds modernist reading techniques (which, in demanding epistemological closure, emulate an idealist or rationalist ontology) insufficient to the task of creating meaning in the epistemologically closed fashion McHale argues those modernist techniques encourage. Consequently, the reader is forced rather to shift reading modes into a more provisional, context-driven epistemology which withholds closure while demanding that the reader remain open to future textual encounters which may offer the possibility for new (yet still provisional) formulations of meaning. Moreover, in the pragmatist conception of this experiential dimension of the literary transaction, the experience the reader walks away from the text with constitutes, not vicarious or virtual experience, but the Iserian experience in its own right, which remains a usable touchstone for the reader's future experiences.

Rosenblatt argues that, because this very particular experience becomes "part of the ongoing life of the individual," it becomes literally "part of the life experience with which [the individual] encounters the future" (RTP 141). In this pragmatic conception of the reading act, the experience the reader carries away from the text provides as legitimate a reference point for future experience as any experience can provide:

The reader, then, is not passively receiving the imprint of an already formed object encased in the text. Nor is the reader a distanced spectator. Readers' feeling that they are looking on at the characters and situations of a novel does not contradict the fact they have themselves called forth these scenes during the transaction with the text. They have to draw on their individual past experiences of language and of life to provide the raw materials for this new experience. Hence, even when we feel ourselves as onlookers at the characters and situations of a novel we are also *participants*, having ourselves created the scenes that unroll before us. The aesthetic transaction is not vicarious experience, not "virtual" experience, but a special kind of experience in its own right. (Rosenblatt, TTLWIR 39)

Thus the literary "evocation," for Rosenblatt, "becomes a part of the ongoing stream of [the reader's] life experience, to be reflected on

from any angle important to him as a human being" (RTP 12). Consequently, any opposition which might be posited between art and life is "untenable" (RTP 27; TTLWIR 37). Similarly, for Dewey, the "work" of art must necessarily be seen as a "lived through" experience (AE 162). "Dewey, denying a break between ordinary life and art, stressed that *an* experience, an aesthetic experience, was simply the stuff of ordinary day-to-day experience defined, heightened, complete" (Rosenblatt, RTP 37). For Dewey, the aesthetic experience as it is embodied in the work of art is not some mere by-product of experience, but the "revelation of what experience is all about. For Dewey, the aesthetic haunts each moment as a near or remote possibility" (Alexander 80). Thus, when Dewey argues that "esthetic experience is experience in its integrity" (AE 274), we must recognize that, for him, the aesthetic experience as it is evoked in the work of art is a concentrated and essential example of experience as a whole, and thus constitutes the foundation for his entire philosophy. "For this reason, while the theory of esthetics put forth by a philosopher is incidentally a test of the capacity of its author to have the experience that is the subject-matter of his analysis, it is also much more than that. It is a test of the capacity of the system he puts forth to grasp the nature of experience itself" (AE 274).

Art, because it concentrates and essentializes the aesthetic experience into an object which can evoke the kind of tension found in the "moments of resistance" or conflict and dissensus Dewey saw as potentially ameliorative and powerful within a culture or society, thus exemplifies all meaningful human experience. "Since the artist cares in a particular way for the phase of experience in which union is achieved, he does not shun moments of resistance and tension. He rather cultivates them, not for their own sake but because of their potentialities" (AE 15). Dewey's emphasis on the phases of experience expressed in the work of art which have to do with tension and conflict points up the educative role art as aesthetic experience plays in his pragmatism. However, although art embodies and essentializes all meaningful human experience for Dewey, where meaning itself is concerned, "the social dimension cannot be forgotten" (Alexander 264). In fact, the individual's experience as it is represented in the reading act, for example, is "mute and unavailable, an event in the world but not in possession of itself as expression. Only when this embodiment is a socially shared event does it become used and so available for self-interpretation and expressive enactment" (151). Meaning is by its very nature a socially and culturally determined characteristic of a shared experience. The very mind which invests and interprets meaning is, for the pragmatist, "a system of beliefs,

recognitions and ignorances, of acceptances and rejections, of expectancies and appraisals of meaning, which have been instituted under the influence of custom and tradition" (161). The individual is always already in the world, which means that he or she is already socialized within an already established set of ethical and aesthetic mores, enculturated by the environment in which he or she lives. Yet, unlike the poststructuralist's determined or constructed or reconstructed self, which stands at the mercy of its imprisoning cultural and social limits, the pragmatist's self can, through this social and cultural process of communication, alter the culture in which it exists. Indeed, it is through this process that, in the pragmatist's view, culture is made manifest and perpetuated in the world:

The dominant fact of human existence is the inhabitation of a world of meaning and value. The world lives in all these symbols through which we actively share or create our existence with others. Culture is the activity of communication. Ultimately, culture is nothing else than all these symbolic modes of shared participation which constitute the world. (151)

Through communication, and especially through the work of art as both culturally engendered and culturally ameliorative experience, not only does art become a "potential for the shared experience of a community at a particular moment in time, but it continues to have power in the historical life of the culture. Art provides a reservoir of experience vital to the exploration of the meaning of existence" (Alexander 200). Thus the artist (and, by evoking the work of art in the creative process of transaction, the appreciator/critic), an individual who creates an object to be shared within the community, effects the paradigmatic communication act, which is both individual and communal, both creative of and potentially ameliorative within the culture that has produced that act. The reading act, or any act of communication, has the potential for changing the individual and/or culture that communication is shared with.

In this way, the act of communication both makes the communicating individual's experience meaningful and helps create, alter or reinforce culture by making real the individual's heretofore private creation or recreation: "Communication is the process of creating participation, of making common what had been isolating and singular; and part of the miracle it achieves is that, in being communicated, the conveyance of meaning gives body and definiteness to the experience of the one who utters as well as to that of those who listen" (AE 224). Because the creative act is often novel or even heretical to the existing culture, and because the act of

communication is by its nature often tenuous, "it encounters risks, possibilities for failure, for disintegration" (Alexander 265). In Alexander's paradigm, the act of achieving expression is, in fact, the "task of realizing the community continuously; the community founded on creative expression must be made and remade *because* it faces the perpetual creative possibilities and the precariousness of the world. Dewey called the community which succeeded in understanding itself in this manner 'democracy'" (265-66). Herein lies the significance of the Deweyan aesthetic to *Gravity's Rainbow*: the structure of Pynchon's novel provides its readers with the kind of tension, conflict and thus necessity to make and remake meaning and community which Dewey saw as integral to a culture of democracy. *Gravity's Rainbow* requires the reader to continually shift perspectives, to make meaning provisionally and to be willing to surrender that meaning upon the discovery of new information or insight into new connections, which the impossibly complex narrative delivers at every turn. In this way, the novel provides a model for culture which is a legitimate alternative to the rationalized, idealized structures they employ to gain and maintain power.

Moreover, the experiential nature of the reader's transaction with the text of *Gravity's Rainbow* is, in the pragmatist's paradigm, excellent training for life within a community which must continually make and remake itself. In short, Pynchon's novel is experientially educative for anyone who wants to learn what it would be like to live in the precarious and dynamic flux of a truly democratic culture. In this way, the novel is a prime example of the kind of art Giles Gunn argues Dewey deemed absolutely essential to the training of individuals in the "untried experiment" of participatory democracy. "Only by emancipating and expanding the meanings of which experience is capable . . . can culture advance; and only by critically assessing the valuations of which cultural experience is composed can the meanings potential to it, but not yet effectively realized within it, be successfully liberated. Such liberation is what Dewey meant by social reform in its deepest sense" (Gunn 91). The kind of reform Gunn refers to here is the same kind of reform Pynchon enacts in *Gravity's Rainbow*—most appropriate, for, as Gunn points out, art is the place where the liberation of values not yet realized within a culture can find its most effective hypothesization:

Art criticizes not by direct statement but only through indirect projection. It does so, as Dewey later phrased it in *Art as Experience*, by holding up to the imagination possible outcomes of merely potential experiences, experiences which, in their contrast with actual conditions and their

probable consequences, nonetheless constitute, he believed, the most searching evaluation of the latter that can be made. (92)

Therefore, Gunn argues, art is more "moral" for Dewey than moralities:

Moralities merely consecrate the status quo, reinforce the established order. Art, by contrast, challenges the status quo and destabilizes the established order by "keeping alive the sense of purposes that outrun evidence and of meanings that transcend indurated habit." In other words, the moral function of art is identical with its critical function: "to remove prejudice, do away with the scales that keep the eye from seeing, tear away the veils due to want and custom, perfect the power to perceive." (92)

Thus art is always political for Dewey, because it always either reinforces or destabilizes the moral and cultural status quo. The kind of art best suited for a creative democratic culture is that which insistently calls into question the values, meanings and habits of the culture which engenders it. So Alexander's definition of democratic culture as one in which communication and meaning must constantly be made and remade comports with this Deweyan conception of the didactic and educative purposiveness of the art object. Or, as Gunn writes:

By defining art and its attendant critical disciplines as forms of culture whose purpose is to enable the actual to be viewed in light of its own potential, Dewey's aesthetics, no less than his politics, joins the diagnostic with the revisionary and the deconstructive with the heuristic. It does so by showing how culture itself is, or should be, comprised of forms not only critical of previous cultural closures but also potentially creative of further extensions and realizations of experience itself. What therefore marks such a culture as democratic *and* critical has less to do with its professions than with its practices, and the character of its practices . . . depends in the last analysis on the intellectual test it always puts to itself, as to all forms of social existence: to what extent do its conclusions, when they are referred back to the experiences of ordinary life, and its processes of associated living, render those experiences "more significant" and "more luminous," and thus "make our dealings with them more fruitful." (93)

We could hardly ask for a more cogent summary of what *Gravity's Rainbow* sets out to do than this appraisal of Dewey's politicized aesthetic. In content and structure, Pynchon's novel is consistently deconstructive with regard to previous cultural closures, and especially

with regard to epistemological systems derived from an idealist European tradition which rely on culturally naturalized assumptions about knowledge to maintain their power bases within and upon culture and its constituents. In both content and structure, the novel consistently extends organizational and onto-epistemological paradigms of experience to include a heterogeneous flux of actual experience to make that experience more luminous and fruitful. Particularly with regard to culturally-encoded organizational paradigms, Pynchon's postmodern narrative provides the kind of experience which has yet to be widely realized in American culture, the continually self-critical and self-aware (and thus flexible and pliable) organizational system Dewey called the untried experiment of creative and participatory democracy. For Dewey, America needed to go back to school to learn about real democracy, and only through the kind of educative discourse Pynchon's novel provides could it ever learn to realize a culture of democracy as Dewey envisioned it.¹⁰

3. The Fork in the Road and Deweyan Democracy

While in the heterogeneous Zone, itself a symbol for the flexibility and dynamism of a democratic culture, Slothrop reflects on his American ancestry, and especially on his first American ancestor, William. A hog drover who came to love his pigs and the preterition they symbolized for him, William eventually wrote a tract inspired by his animals' "nobility and personal freedom" entitled *On Preterition*. As the narrator describes it:

It had to be published in England, and is among the first books to've been not only banned but also ceremonially burned in Boston. Nobody wanted to hear about all the Preterite, the many God passes over when he chooses a few for salvation. William argued holiness for these "second Sheep," without whom there'd be no elect. You can bet the Elect in Boston were pissed off about that. And it got worse. William felt that what Jesus was for the elect, Judas Iscariot was for the Preterite. Everything in the Creation has its equal and opposite counterpart. How can Jesus be an exception? could we feel for him anything but horror in the face of the unnatural, the extracreation? Well, if he is the son of man, and if what we feel is not horror but love, then we have to love Judas too. Right? (GR 555)

William Slothrop makes an argument here very similar to the one Dewey makes in *A Common Faith* when he pleads his case for the "elect" sheep and the "passed over" goats. In essence, William argues

for a kind of spiritual democracy, a "church" in which the distinction between the elect and the preterite falls away into a community of equals, a democratic culture which no longer makes the distinction between souls Oedipa reflects on at the end of *The Crying of Lot 49*. William's descendant Tyrone is inspired to ask:

Could [William] have been the fork in the road America never took, the singular point she jumped the wrong way from? Suppose the Slothropite heresy had had the time to consolidate and prosper? Might there have been fewer crimes in the name of Jesus, and more mercy in the name of Judas Iscariot? It seems to Tyrone Slothrop that there might be a route back. (556)

William's earlier and Tyrone's later vision of this alternative America reflects the vision Gunn attributes to both Emerson and the elder Henry James. It amounts to a "call for a new form of social solidarity, a new kind of human community, in which there is no moral responsibility more compelling than to remain a human being speaking to other human beings about what is inherently sacred and salutary about the spontaneous, universal, and potentially diverse sense of humanity they share as their natural birthright" (Gunn 71).¹¹ William's attempt to elevate the preterite bespeaks the concern with a democratic culture that is central to *Gravity's Rainbow* and to the sixties' revolutionary mentality which subtends Pynchon's last three novels.

Tyrone's desire to "find some way back" to that mythical fork in the road ("At least one moment of passage, one it will hurt to lose, ought to be found for every street now indifferently gray with commerce, with war, with repression . . . finding it, learning to cherish what was lost, mightn't we find some way back?" [GR 693]) attests to two ideas. First, in choosing the commercial, imperialistic death structures of Europe and of the Man, America has forsaken the promise, the gift from unseen powers, it was supposed to have represented; America has taken a wrong road. Second, because the fork represents a "road not taken," the implication is that the kind of democratic culture which remains a mytheme in the American psyche has nonetheless *never existed in America*. It has been incorporated into our myths and into the ways we talk about ourselves, but as a realized culture of participation and creativity, democracy is still Dewey's untried experiment in American history. Or, as Paul Goodman wrote in *Growing Up Absurd*, "the fault is not with democracy, but that we have failed to have enough of it" (qtd. in Howard 64).

At least since Dewey's time, apologists for the American status quo have argued that a truly democratic culture is both impractical and

even, to some extent, undesirable. As Robert Westbrook points out, social scientists in the twenties, basing their conclusions on empirical studies of voting behavior and the like, argued that democracy needed to be redefined to reflect the reality of democratic elitism in the United States. Democratic "realists," like Walter Lippman, argued that the common citizen was capable of only limited retention of information, and that, moreover, the information available to the common man consisted mainly of symbols expertly manipulated by controlling elites. For this reason, the realists argued:

Democratic theorists have erred in asserting the primacy of self-government. The criterion that should be used to assess a government was not the extent to which its citizens were self-governing but "whether it is producing a certain minimum of health, of decent housing, of material necessities, of education, of freedom, of pleasures, of beauty." For the democratic realist, substantial self-government was a minor good, readily expendable in a complex industrial society. (Westbrook 300)

But for Dewey, such a compromise of democracy nullified the very nature of democratic participation. In his view, "democracy" as it existed in America amounted to economic, political and intellectual oligarchy. As Westbrook writes of Dewey's battles with other liberal democratic realists:

Whereas Dewey called for the shaping of democratic character and the creation of a common democratic culture suffusing schools, factories, political parties, and other institutions, other liberals have moved to strip democracy of its positive, substantive claims in order to render it a purely negative, procedural doctrine. Whereas Dewey urged maximum participation by a responsible public in the direction of human affairs, other liberals have sought to maximize the responsibility of powerful elites while at the same time insulating these elites from most of the pressures of the benighted "masses." They have hoped thereby to render the ordinary citizen the passive beneficiary of decisions made by the leaders of competing special interest groups: at best, government *for* but not *by* the people. This is, to be sure, a very realistic notion of democracy, so realistic that it deprives the democratic ideal of most of its critical function by raising the prevailing practice of many nations, including the United States, to normative status. (xvi)

The kind of "democracy" Dewey observed in his time was similar to the kind Thomas Docherty refers to in our time when he writes that democracy has come to be seen as simply the "freedom to make a

small hieroglyphic mark on a piece of paper some twenty occasions in a normal human lifetime" (319). For Dewey, such "democracy" was no kind of democracy at all. The very foundation of American society (aside even from the religious sub-narrative whose divisiveness has already been remarked), that is, of a capitalist economy and a largely laissez-faire philosophy of its regulation, was an almost insurmountable obstacle barring America from ever achieving the kind of democratic ideal Dewey envisioned for American culture (Westbrook 431; cf. 50). For these reasons, Dewey felt that democracy in America required radical redefinition. He spent much of his life attempting to formulate such a redefinition and to set an agenda for the radical revolution which would enable his participatory democracy to be realized.

In contrast to democratic realism, Dewey's participatory democracy (like its later formulation by proponents including SDS and similar radically democratic coalitions in the sixties) required the belief that ordinary men and women have the intelligence to effectively direct the affairs of society. The fact that they didn't usually demonstrate such facility was for Dewey a cultural problem rather than one endemic to the human condition. Dewey believed that individuals were enculturated to be subjects, and that, with the proper changes in education and thus enculturation and socialization, they could just as easily be educated as productive citizens capable of participating in and collectively directing the affairs of their society. The narrowly conceived definition of democracy as a form of political machinery had to be radically reconceived as a way of life reflected in all social, political, educational and private institutions. Such reeducation, Dewey believed, had to be enacted on all fronts, but one of the most important, as we have already seen, was the formulation of an aesthetic in which art would come to serve as a culturally and morally ameliorative medium. This reeducation required elimination of the oligarchic monopoly on intelligence as well as economic and political power. And this elimination of intellectual oligarchy required a sweeping reform of our faith in what Dewey called "critical intelligence" (West 101). Therefore, education itself became for Dewey the foremost responsibility of any culture which wished to call itself democratic (Gunn 73).

It is just this kind of education which Pynchon both attempts and achieves in *Gravity's Rainbow*.¹² In deconstructing many of the idealist narrative substructures underlying both epistemological and actual power structures in the West, Pynchon enacts the same kind of excavation of power and metaphysical critique James and Dewey devoted their lives to. That he (and they) did so in the name of a democratically-oriented, post-metaphysical ethics becomes clear when

we consider Pynchon's alternatives to such hegemonic power structures in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Pynchon's continual elevation of the preterite,¹³ his emphasis on ad hoc arrangements like Geli's and, to some extent, Slothrop's in the Zone, his characterization of Slothrop and the Counterforce as thinly disguised analogues to members of sixties' radical activist groups, his literary enactment of a pragmatic pluriverse in narrative form and structure—all these elements point to an abiding concern with an America that holds much promise in its possibility for democratic egalitarianism, but also much disappointment in its pitiful attempts to realize that democratic ideal.

Apologists for the "realistic" liberal democratic status quo continue to claim that there is no hope for the realization of such a democratic ideal in our or any other time. Even neo-pragmatist Richard Rorty says that Dewey's hopes for such a realization of democracy are perhaps totally unjustifiable (187). Yet Pynchon gives us a world in which some hope is possible. In the world of *Gravity's Rainbow*, runaway lemmings return out of love to their human friends (GR 729). In that world power can be subverted by the same kind of language games Pynchon himself enacts in the novel: when Mexico and Seaman Bodine disrupt the elites' dinner party with their disgusting gustatory demands, it is no coincidence that one of the waiters has the final word ("Filth frosting, gentlemen" [717]) in the melee. The lowest of the preterite here has his own bit of tongue-in-cheek fun at the expense of the rich and powerful diners.

Finally, in an ultimate subversion of the idealist tradition (which Dewey and James insisted derived from Plato and Aristotle) *Gravity's Rainbow* painstakingly deconstructs throughout, we have Slothrop's sodium-amytal-induced western fantasy. Subverting the Platonic world of forms itself, this fantasy, in which Slothrop encounters Crutchfield "the westward man" and Whappo (his "little pard"), reveals a one-of-each world of Platonic forms which are so democratically individual that the entire notion of forms is rendered absurd:

Slothrop moves among the bins and hung cloths, invisible, among horses and dogs, pigs, brown-uniformed militia, Indian women with babies slung in shawls, servants from the pastel houses farther up the hillside—the plaza is seething with life, and Slothrop is puzzled. Isn't there supposed to be only one of each?

A. Yes.

Q. Then one Indian girl . . .

A. One *pure* Indian. One *mestiza*. One *criolla*. Then: one Yaqui. One Navaho. One Apache— (70)

The democratic impulse to elevate the individual above the forms or organizational structures here suggests that there is hope for democracy in Pynchon's novel, but for him, as well as for the pragmatists, that hope lies in action, in overcoming the glozing neuter mentality which prevents action, getting on with the work remaining to be done. Democratic realists may indeed be right in asserting that democratic elitism is the best we can do. The social and political reforms of the sixties toward a culture of participatory democracy were certainly not as successful as the radicals who fought for change dreamed they could be. "America was once, in the Sixties, a land of great hope and drama, and the world watched on, amazed. Now the rest of the world seems to be a place of great hope and drama, and Americans watch on, amazed and chagrined at our own feebleness of imagination and will" (Howard xv). Yet *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Vineland* ask if we can't do better. Where Oedipa's experience outlines the problem America faces in its efforts toward democracy, *Gravity's Rainbow* delineates the cultural values (philosophical and otherwise) which continue to restrain those efforts, as well as an alternative post-metaphysical culture which could provide the best medium for the growth of such a democratic society. Where *Gravity's Rainbow* emphasizes a countercultural affirmation of the democratic impulse which helped to fuel the radically revolutionary mentality of the sixties, *Vineland* emphasizes just how much work is left to be done toward a democratization of America in the wake of the wonderfully democratic, but so largely unsuccessful, sixties' revolution.

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Notes

¹Michael Harrington's *Other America* clearly anticipates Oedipa's revelation:

The United States in the sixties contains an affluent society within its borders. Millions and tens of millions enjoy the highest standard of life the world has ever known. . . . At the same time, the United States contains an underdeveloped nation, a culture of poverty. Its inhabitants do not suffer the extreme privation of the peasants of Asia or the tribesmen of Africa, yet the mechanism of the misery is similar. They are beyond history, beyond progress, sunk in a paralyzing, maiming routine. (158)

Pynchon's sense of these two Americas was in the air in the early sixties. *Lot 49*, like all his novels, is based in historical phenomena, and deals with those phenomena from a very particular political point of view: in this case, the radically democratic impulse in the early sixties which would erupt into a full-scale revolution.

²This expectation is in keeping with the jeremiadic myth of America as a New Jerusalem, a promised land whose chosen people have traded their possibility of grace and redemption for the golden calf of economic, military and political hegemony. In this sense, Sacvan Bercovitch is correct to categorize *Gravity's Rainbow* as an "anti-jeremiad," along with other countercultural texts of the sixties like Mailer's *Armies of the Night* and Dotson Rader's *I Ain't Marching Anymore*. Pynchon's texts do seem to buy into the notion of American exceptionalism, which Bercovitch argues subtends both jeremiad and anti-jeremiad narratives. It does not follow, however, that Pynchon's efforts (and others like them) therefore become "a fundamental force against social change" (Bercovitch 204).

Without wishing to digress into a polemic against Bercovitch's critique of "the American ideology" (a subject Gunn has treated cogently and lucidly), I submit that Pynchon's rhetorical position as a critic of American culture remains viable for at least two reasons. First, Bercovitch situates the American myth as it is expressed in the jeremiad within the seventeenth century, limiting his definition of that myth largely to the Calvinist dichotomy of Elect and Preterite. Through the influence of Jonathan Edwards, this dichotomy gave rise to an economic secularism in which American individualism became associated with the free-market ideology of laissez-faire capitalism. Even though Pynchon retains an obvious penchant for American exceptionalism, because he *begins* his critique of American culture by de-legitimizing as anti-Democratic the Calvinist division of souls which Bercovitch's jeremiad in part depends on, Pynchon can, in effect, criticize the American myth and its concomitant ideology from a position beyond that which Bercovitch (necessarily) defines as jeremiadic. Whereas the Puritan Jeremiahs and, later, their eighteenth-century American counterparts posited an Elect population existing exclusively within their New Jerusalem and a Preterite or passed-over population without, Pynchon insists that we examine both sides of this dichotomy as they have manifested themselves *within* America.

Second, in arguing that the jeremiadic narratives of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries simply reinforce a middleclass conception of America and the American myth, Bercovitch cannot subsume Pynchon's countercultural defiance of that middleclass status quo so acerbically symbolized by Mailer's "Grandma with orange hair" who remains oblivious to the sufferings in Vietnam while she mindlessly shoves coins into a Las Vegas slot machine. Pynchon may indeed subscribe to an American exceptionalism which insists that we should, somehow, have turned out better than we did, yet he is not chauvinistically American in the sense of Bercovitch's Puritans. Pynchon's lament for America, his critique of America's exclusionism, represents a cry of "how far-fallen" (GR 569); thus he offers alternatives based on the egalitarianism and communal spirit of sixties' radicalism—a far cry from a "radicalism" that simply reinforces a middleclass status quo, what Bercovitch

describes as “a sort of liminal interior dialogue that in effect reinforces the mainstream culture” (205).

³In *Do It!*, Jerry Rubin explicitly connects Puritanism (and repressed sexuality), economics and war: “Puritanism leads to Vietnam. Sexual insecurity results in a supermasculinity trip called imperialism. American foreign policy, especially in Vietnam, makes no sense except sexually. America has a frustrated penis trying to drive itself in Vietnam’s tiny slit to prove it is a man” (qtd. in Howard 2). *Gravity’s Rainbow* makes more or less the same point, but perhaps a bit less graphically.

⁴On the other hand, as Judith Chambers argues, Slothrop’s plight does serve as a kind of *memento mori*—a rousing call to action in the face of one’s own mortality: “Slothrop’s saga reminds us in the most experiential and specific language possible that the way to transformation rests in the recognition and acceptance of who we are, common and separate and somewhat insignificant human beings born into a radically technologized world where we need to reaffirm our common destiny: mortality” (179). We need not agree with Chambers’s positive reading of Slothrop’s disintegration to share her sense of the mortal message the novel as a whole conveys.

⁵Todd Gitlin too makes this distinction between the hedonists and the activists who together constituted the counterculture:

There were many more weekend dope-smokers than “heads”; many more readers of the *Oracle* than writers for it; many more cohabitators than orgiasts; many more turners-on than droppers out. Thanks to the sheer numbers and concentration of youth, the torrent of drugs, the sexual revolution, the traumatic war, the general stampede away from authority, and the trend-spotting media, it was easy to assume that all the styles of revolt and disaffection were spilling together, tributaries into a common torrent of youth and euphoria, life against death, joy over sacrifice, now over later, remaking the whole bleeding world.

Of preconditions in society there were many, but the core of what came to be called the counterculture was *organized*. (214)

⁶One of the best examples of a truly radical fringe group who nonetheless bought into the binarity which characterized Their systems was the Diggers, who were “either/or and they liked hard-and-fast formulations: ‘if you’re not a digger/you’re property’; ‘if you Really believe it/do it’” (Gitlin 224–25).

⁷“Though most of the characters fail to uncover those vestiges of humanity except in rare moments, the book itself provides the reader with the possibilities for renewal that the characters miss” (Chambers 126). I argue that the book does so through its style at least as much as its content.

⁸In addition to Kathryn Hume and Molly Hite, many other critics—including Chambers, James S. Hans, Michael Kowalewski, Paul Maltby, Raymond A. Mazurek, Brian McHale and Thomas Schaub—have remarked the political and

ideological implications of Pynchon's style in *Gravity's Rainbow*. As Hans summarizes the issue:

The book is initially confusing to read because our interpretive codes have become so rigid and inadequate to the task that they lead us into endless quandaries rather than into wonder. If we open our codes to the scrutiny Pynchon places them under, the confusion does indeed give way to wonder, both because we see the world as alive rather than as a big dumb rock and because the novel itself comes to be seen in the same light. It is not an ossified structure that we can passively consume . . . ; it is an attempt to jar us out of our passivity, to remove us from the world of the glozing neuter in which we spend most of our lives. (280)

⁹As William James observes, where monism is fatalistic, pluralism is melioristic (268-69). Put another way, in the rationalist's "perfect," predetermined world, "regret obtains not," because "'all striving is vain'" (332). James explains:

But taking the absolute edition of the world concretely means a different hypothesis. Rationalists take it concretely and *oppose* it to the world's finite editions. They give it a particular nature. It is perfect, finished. Everything known there is known along with everything else; here, where ignorance reigns, far otherwise. If there is want there, there also is the satisfaction provided. Here all is process; that world is timeless. Possibilities obtain in our world; in the absolute world, where all that is *not* is from eternity impossible, and all that *is* is necessary, the category of possibility has no application. In this world crimes and horrors are regrettable. In that totalized world regret obtains not, for "the existence of ill in the temporal order is the very condition of the perfection of the eternal order." (459-60)

¹⁰Cf. Westbrook 271.

¹¹These values espoused in *On Preterition* are also precisely the values Oedipa embraces when she embraces the old sailor (126).

¹²Edward Mendelson argues that "Pynchon, far from trying to seduce his readers and critics into a permanent relation with his texts, constantly urges us to distrust the enveloping embrace of fiction—to *use* fiction to call attention to the knowledge we need for making choices in the world outside" (181-82). The "use" Mendelson refers to is cultural criticism—another name for Deweyan pragmatism.

¹³Hume's take on the Preterite deserves mention in this context:

What the preterite condition seems to mean to Pynchon is a form of openness that lets one respond to the needs of others. . . . Those who accept their preterition put off the armor we all construct to protect ourselves from the blows of fate or malice. The closed systems we make and accept are forms of such armor. We subordinate others in order to

protect ourselves. By giving up our claim to protection—and after all, as Enzian notes . . . nothing really can protect us from death—we open ourselves to possibilities of touch and contact. (61)

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