

Useless Lumpens in *Gravity's Rainbow*

Robert Holton

In the postwar period, as debates about modern conformism and the emerging technologies of psychological conditioning and social control gained momentum, much attention was given to those groups who appeared to remain outside the powerfully centripetal forces of cultural hegemony. The desire for an escape to some space outside was frequently addressed in the narratives that proliferated during the postwar period. Perhaps the best known was Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, in which alienated Holden Caulfield makes a run for it but ultimately has nowhere to go and suffers a mental collapse. Ten years later, in Updike's *Rabbit, Run*, the alienated Rabbit Angstrom also makes a run for it, but he too is unable to figure out where to go and, instead of getting away, he returns for three more Rabbit novels spread over a few decades. In both the novel and the movie version of *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Randle Patrick McMurphy initially seems well-suited to a successful escape, but in the end it's nothing that a lobotomy can't cure and Nurse Ratchet takes care of that. Other popular movies had already worked this theme. *The Great Escape*, for example, made Steve McQueen a star, while Hiltz, the character he plays, ends up back in custody after a dramatic but abortive escape attempt leaves him tangled up in Nazi barbed wire. Played by Paul Newman, *Cool Hand Luke*—the man who would not conform, according to the movie's blurbs—seems to have a good chance at first, but (a) he doesn't have anywhere to go and (b) he is hunted down and killed. *The Misfits*, with its cast of stars, its Arthur Miller script and John Huston direction, tells a story of modern American containment and defeat. Sepia-toned and nostalgic, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* follows a pair of loveable outlaws as they run all the way to Bolivia, where they are finally shot down. Lesser known perhaps, but equally unequivocal, is *Lonely Are the Brave*. Based on a novel by Edward Abbey, the movie features Kirk Douglas as an anachronistic modern cowboy non-conformist misfit who breaks out of jail and makes a run for Mexico on horseback but is killed on a highway by a truck loaded with bathroom fixtures.

Paranoia aside, in most of these cases, the modern system is clearly out to get them—and, in fact, it gets most of them. The centrifugal thrust of these escape narratives—repeated so often as to suggest a form of cultural repetition compulsion—is a significant indicator of the cultural climate of the postwar period and the need to imagine some habitable space outside what

David Riesman called “The Lonely Crowd,” Paul Goodman called the “closed room” (159) of modern culture, and C. Wright Mills characterized as the realm of “Cheerful Robots” (233) programmed for efficient use. In the introduction to *Slow Learner*, Pynchon writes of the “centrifugal lures” (8) he experienced as he developed into a mature writer amid the rebellious atmosphere of “post-Beat” America (9). Two texts he cites are Mailer’s “The White Negro” (which urges whites to become “Negro” psychopaths to escape) and Kerouac’s *On the Road* (which encourages a wide range of unacceptable behavior but ultimately holds out little hope of escape either on the personal or on the social levels). Mailer’s predictions include nuclear holocaust and/or the onset of a concentration camp model of social organization. Having glimpsed the approach of an apocalyptic convulsion in the form of nuclear war that would destroy modernity, Kerouac’s *Sal Paradise* ends the novel staring out into the darkness and contemplating the “forlorn rags of growing old” (310).

Still, writes Pynchon, the result was a desire to explore “the wider range of life to be found outside” (8), as “Some of us couldn’t resist the temptation to go out and see what was happening”—particularly to seek out the “alternative lowlife” that persisted out there. In fact, most of the escape narratives mentioned above involve “alternative lowlife,” also known as the *lumpenproletariat*, and this centrifugal narrative dynamic structures much of Pynchon’s work as well: when Dennis Flange (“Lowlands”) and Oedipa Maas (*Lot 49*) leave the comforts of their middle-class suburban lives and go in search of a space on the outside in a garbage dump, a skid row rooming house and so on, for example, or when Benny Profane explores the New York City sewer system and other social topographies referred to by Rachel Owlglass as “[p]laces I won’t know” (27). Indeed, one of Pynchon’s earliest works, the unpublished “Minstrel Island,” posits a totalitarian world run by IBM and a rag-tag *lumpen* opposition made up of street musicians and prostitutes.

In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the stakes are even higher and there are a number of scenes that illustrate this centrifugal desire. One of the most evocative is the soliloquy Webley Silvernail delivers to the lab animals as he returns them “to the cages and the rationalized forms of death”:

I would set you free, if I knew how. But it isn’t free out here. All the animals, the plants, the minerals, even other kinds of men, are being broken and reassembled every day, to preserve an elite few. . . . I can’t even give you hope that it will be different someday—that They’ll come out and forget death, and lose Their technology’s elaborate terror, and stop using every other form of life without mercy . . . and be like you instead, simply here, simply alive . . . (230)

Pynchon’s image locates these lab animals in an extended version of what Foucault calls the “carceral archipelago” (301), as arbitrary victims of their own use value in a merciless system. They are being conditioned—a

process with obvious implications for humans. In *Growing Up Absurd*, Goodman makes the lab rat analogy clear: "So imagine as a model of our Organized Society: An apparently closed room in which there is a large rat race as the dominant center of attention. And let us consider the human relation possible in such a place" (159-60). The threat of behavior modification is explicit in many postwar narratives: in *The Great Escape*, the McQueen character is told that the prison camp will teach him some manners. The school Holden Caulfield flees claims to mold boys into "fine young men" (2). Cool Hand Luke is told "You gonna get used to wearin' them chains after a while" as part of the process by which he will "get his mind right". Ken Kesey's McMurphy is subjected to a variety of techniques including electroshock therapy and lobotomy.

The possibilities for human freedom and the merciless operations of the modern system were seen as vital issues in the postwar period and this same set of concerns animates *Gravity's Rainbow*. As an infant, Tyrone Slothrop's use value was exploited in a series of conditioning experiments whose effect on him is, quite literally, incalculable. It is this usefulness that ultimately leads to his being hunted across the Zone in a merciless pursuit against the backdrop of postwar devastation that exemplifies the system's consequences on the macro level just as Slothrop's situation demonstrates it at the level of the individual. The man in charge of Pavlovian conditioning in *Gravity's Rainbow* is Pointsman, and while his attempt to capture a dog for use in the laboratory is rendered as an episode of slapstick (42-47), the implications are clear. His willingness to use others is absolute, and, if he is successful, "There will be precious little room for any hope at all" (86). A little later, Roger Mexico's response to Pointsman's unexpected smile is unequivocal: "it will haunt him—as the most evil look he has ever had from a human face" (89).

There are a number of similar issues compacted in the Silvernail passage. First, he offers no hope. Second, there is the question of mercy, a term that recurs several times throughout the novel, for example when Slothrop hears the American MPs at his hotel door: "American voices, country voices, high-pitched and without mercy" (256). As merciless in their assertion of power as those who rule over lab rats, they (They!) force Slothrop to realize for the first time what it must be like to witness power, in this case American power, from the outside. Whatever these country boys might once have been, they are now enforcers for that "elite few" who, according to Silvernail, use "every other life form without mercy." The same phrase is used by Enzian to describe the ravages of von Trotha, one of Pynchon's chief villains, in his genocidal campaign against the Hereros: "The thumb of mercy never touched his scales" (362). From colonialism to chemistry, modernity's fixation on use value is portrayed as relentless and ultimately suicidal. The central principle is "to violate" as a means of maximizing efficient use:

Taking and not giving back, demanding that “productivity” and “earnings” keep on increasing with time, the System removing from the rest of the World these vast quantities of energy to keep its own tiny desperate fraction showing a profit: and not only most of humanity—most of the World, animal, vegetable and mineral, is laid waste in the process. . . . [The System] sooner or later must crash to its death, when its addiction to energy has become more than the World can supply, dragging with it innocent souls all along the chain of life. Living inside the System is like riding across the country in a bus driven by a maniac bent on suicide. (412)

When Franz Pökler enters Dora, he witnesses the end result of this suicidal logic. The slave labor that produced such startling breakthroughs in military technology, and thus enabled the maximization of death, also produced as a by-product “odors of shit, death, sweat, sickness, mildew, piss” and great numbers of “naked corpses being carried out . . . to be stacked in front of the crematoriums” (432).

While the degree may vary, the principle of merciless use characterizes modern power in *Gravity's Rainbow*. When Leni Pokler poses the following rhetorical question, no answer is forthcoming: “They know how to use nearly everybody. What will happen to the ones they can't use?” (155). It is a complex question. It tends to be the case that the useless ones exist on the outside as social waste (W.A.S.T.E., to borrow a well-known Pynchonian acronym from *Lot 49*) and this overlaps considerably with the “alternative lowlife” that is identified in *Slow Learner* as making up the heterogeneous “wider range of life to be found outside” (8). The useless ones might be incarcerated or exterminated by arbitrary genocidal fiat. In addition to the Hereros, Pynchon includes a number of instances: the natives of Argentina exterminated by General Roca, the 1916 massacres of Kirghiz and others in central Asia. One might even add the story of Frans Van der Groov and the annihilation of the dodoes: “What *were* they good for?” (108), he asks in frustration. On the other hand, the useless ones might simply go on, ignored and unnoticed. In any case, some creatures—including some people—just seem to be good for nothing, and prominent among these we find the useless lumpenproletariat.

The Lonely Crowd, David Riesman's hugely influential 1950 study of social psychology, divided Americans into groups such as the *adjusted* (also known as the other-directed or the conformists) and the *anomics*, the “ruleless [and] ungoverned.” The adjusted are those who “fit the culture as though they were made for it,” he notes, “as in fact they are” (287)—that is, they have responded appropriately to the conditioning techniques of the culture. The anomics include all the misfits, the maladjusted, those who can't or won't fit in, that assortment of individuals existing beyond—or beneath—the reach of conformity: drug users, sexual deviants, criminals, lunatics and so on. “Taken all together,” estimates Riesman, “the anomics—ranging from overt outlaws to ‘catatonic’ types . . . —constitute a sizable number in America” (290). Whatever

their actual numbers, this category appealed to the centrifugal imaginations of artists and writers. The Beat literature that influenced Pynchon is permeated with an eccentric and anomic sensibility, yet one that articulated, he writes, “a sane and decent affirmation of what we all want to believe about American values” (9).

In his discussion of anomia, Riesman refers explicitly to the lumpenproletariat, an unwieldy rubric designating a heterogeneous category that seems largely to escape categorization and thus poses a challenge to analysts such as Marx who prefer more conceptual order. While the *proletariat*, the *bourgeoisie*, and the *aristocracy* are clearly defined groups, the lumpens resist taxonomy. By contrast, they comprise a group of people who have, willingly or otherwise, more or less slipped out of the ordered class system—or as is sometimes the case in the Zone, find that the ordered system has slipped away from them. Often, but not always poor—the German word *lumpen* means *ragged*—they nonetheless exist uselessly outside the economic structures of labor that constitute the industrial working classes. In a famous passage from *The Eighteenth Brumaire* Marx attempts to list the members of this group—and the line up sounds a bit like a *Gravity’s Rainbow* catalog or list of characters:

Alongside decayed *roués* with dubious means of subsistence and of dubious origin, alongside ruined and adventurous offshoots of the bourgeoisie, were vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, mountebanks, *lazzaroni* [disreputable street people], pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, *maquereaux* [pimps], brothel keepers, porters, *litterati*, organ grinders, ragpickers, knife grinders, tinkers, beggars—in short, the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither, which the French call *la bohème*. (149)

An “indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither” is a difficult entity to comprehend (and sounds more and more like life in the Zone.). They are the “scum, offal, refuse of all classes,” writes Marx, and, in remaining outside the normative structures of social ontology, this promiscuous and disorderly lumpen mix, as Jeffrey Mehlman has pointed out, constitutes “the site where that heterogeneity, in its unassimilability to every dialectical totalization, is *affirmed*” (13). The characterization of the lumpen as a site of an unassimilable heterogeneity suggests that this might continue to be a space in which forms of non-conformity and non-compliance might persist off the grid of conditioned sociality. In *Lot 49*, Oedipa Maas wonders whether the derelict old man in the skid row rooming house might possess forms of knowledge and experience unavailable to more conventional citizens, and this wondering is related to the condition of lumpen social withdrawal: “It was not an act of treason, nor possibly even of defiance. But it was a calculated withdrawal, from the life of the Republic, from its machinery” (92-93).

The attraction to these non-bourgeois lumpen spaces is an important element in Pynchon's fiction, and, according to Jeffrey Mehlman, a similar attraction can be located in Marx—despite his explicit rejection. The linguistic exuberance of Marx's prose when he discusses the lumpens registers an "exhilaration," an "almost Rabelaisian verve," and a "certain proliferating energy" (13), a positive tone that contradicts his overtly condemnatory attitude. Perhaps in response to this ambivalence, there seems to arise a compulsion to make lists as a way of containing the anarchic energy and heterogeneity that threatens taxonomic, and perhaps social order. The *Encyclopedia of Marxism* (online) provides another Pynchonesque list: the lumpens include the "outcast, degenerated and submerged elements . . . beggars, prostitutes, gangsters, racketeers, swindlers, petty criminals, tramps, chronic unemployed or unemployables, persons who have been cast out by industry, and all sorts of declassed, degraded or degenerated elements." By admitting their inadequacy, these lists signal that the sublime diversity of individuals may be finally neither subsumed under the unity of an abstract category nor controlled by the totalizing and homogenizing forces of modernity.

Marx's famous catalogue of lumpens concludes with "la bohème" and the overlap between the lumpenproletariat and the bohemians is important. In 1848, the year of Marx's *Communist Manifesto*, Henri Murger's *Scènes de la Vie Bohème* enshrined the free-spirited bohemians in modern cultural iconography. Like Marx, Murger attempts a list, but he too seems undone by the bewildering mixture: along with a variety of artists, pickpockets, murderers, he includes "bear-leaders, sword-eaters, vendors of key-rings, inventors of 'infallible systems,' stockbrokers of doubtful antecedents and the followers of the thousand and one vague and mysterious callings in which the principal occupation is to have none whatever and to be ready at any time to do anything save that which is right" (xvii). A few pages later, he asserts again that "it may be worthwhile to enumerate and classify" this group for those who "cannot have too many dots on the i's of definition" (xxiv), but the task inevitably remains incomplete. Again, this non-totalizable and unassimilable heterogeneity borders at times on incoherence, a quality found also in the characters and plot of Pynchon's novel.

This anarchic meeting ground of artists and the insane, students and criminals, the decadent and the devout, substance abusers and sexual adventurers, scum and refuse, provided centrifugal cultural spaces in the midst of a centripetal and dangerous cultural moment. In addition to the novels and films mentioned above, there were many others besides Pynchon exploring this terrain. Although the term *lumpenproletariat* was not so common, interest among disaffected postwar Americans was strong from Steinbeck's idyllic *Cannery Row* or Nelson Algren's lumpen Chicago to the Beat Generation writers, Hubert Selby Jr.'s depraved Brooklynites, Hunter S. Thompson's Hell's Angels, Charles Bukowski's alcohol-drenched

autobiographical fiction, Cormac McCarthy's *Suttree*. As useless to capitalism as to socialism, this zone of refuse and refusal blurs the line between rejecting the system and being rejected by it, and it is precisely this disorder that allows a sense of possibility—however tentative—to emerge. The enemy is neither capitalism nor communism, but modernity itself as a fundamentally confining and homogenizing structure that, by mid-20th century, seemed headed either toward totalitarianism (whether of the right or the left) or toward some apocalyptic end of history.

In the face of such a fate, this lumpen space of social waste, scum and refuse could even, paradoxically perhaps, be transformed into an outside space, writes Fredric Jameson, “of misfits and oddballs in which the constraints for uniformization and conformity have been removed and human beings grow wild like plants in a state of nature” (99). This relation to nature—and thus to the pastoral, a more conventional literary escape mechanism—is borne out, for example, in the scene late in *Gravity's Rainbow* when an increasingly eccentric Slothrop lets his hair and beard grow and “likes to spend whole days naked, ants crawling up his legs, butterflies lighting on his shoulders, watching the life on the mountains, getting to know shrikes and capercaillies, badgers and marmots” (623). Lumpen heterogeneity here merges with a rejection of modernity, of modern subjectivity, and even of history itself.

Both Marxism and capitalism are animated by a narrative of history as progress, and just as the lumpens play havoc with orderly social taxonomies, they also threaten this historical narrative. Engels complained of the ahistoricity of the lumpens since they are found in every culture and indeed, as Peter Stallybrass concludes, the category seems “to emerge as the very negation of historicity” (84) and thereby threatens to “undo the imagined progress of history and the historical dialectics that [Marx] proposed as the privileged means of understanding history” (79). Indeed, lumpens reside as far from the major currents of modern history as from the channels of efficient productivity. In *Multitude*, Hardt and Negri observe that the lumpens are “thought to be dangerous—either morally dangerous because they are unproductive social parasites—thieves, prostitutes, drug addicts, and the like—or politically dangerous because they are disorganized, unpredictable, and tendentially reactionary.” The useless lumpens exist as “merely a residue . . . a kind of historical refuse” (130). The sense of refuse and disorder resonates throughout lumpen discourse as well as throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*, subverting any commitment to orderly class struggle or to narratives of historical progress. But this lumpen refusal (or inability) to be assimilated is precisely its attraction to those seeking alternatives to the merciless power structures of modernity.

As far to the right as Marx was to the left, Oswald Spengler had an equivalent notion of an ahistorical group: the fellahin. His model of history, explicated in *The Decline of the West*, traces the historical trajectory of world powers, their rise and fall in a parabolic model familiar to readers to *Gravity's*

Rainbow. Pynchon's admission in *Slow Learner* that he experienced a "somber glee at any idea of mass destruction or decline" (13) seems directly related to Spengler's influential theories. According to Spengler, for the Faustian culture of The West, *brennschluss* occurred some time ago and history's gravitational pull was already well underway by the early twentieth century. But, he argues, the rise and fall of great powers primarily affects those who are part of that racial and cultural group and share in its historical destiny. Those unassimilable groups who exist outside the borders, on the margins, and in the interstices of a great imperial civilization remain largely untouched by its historical rise and occupy the ruins after its inevitable fall. The citizens of an imperial culture—the Elect as opposed to the preterite, those Webley Silvernail calls the "elite few"—these are "the peoples whose existence is *world history*" argues Spengler (105), while the others exist in an adjacent ahistorical space. For those alienated moderns searching for the promise of a way out, these lumpen spaces seemed to afford the possibility of an exit, a way to get off the "bus driven by a maniac bent on suicide" (412)—that is, the bus of history.

Spengler notes that when imperial cultures go into decline "cosmopolitan" intellectuals—whom he dismisses as "wasteproducts" and "inefficients" (185)—lose their belief in the nobility of war and their imperial destiny and instead affiliate with the useless ones on the margins of the imperial culture, the "residue," the fellahin, the outcasts, the dregs. So, although Marx strongly disapproves of the lumpens, Spengler has utter disdain for those who ally themselves with the fellahin, and Riesman breezily dismisses the anomics, a significant minority of postwar Americans actively sought out precisely these spaces of residue and waste, drug use and "perversion," of skid row, criminality and lunacy, of racial exclusion and vagrancy. As we see in *Gravity's Rainbow*, these can become the raw materials for a desperate sense of possibility in a modernity that seemed to have run amok, enabling the imagination—perhaps merely delusion—of a counterforce or counterculture. Nicholas Thoburn argues that beginning in the late 1960s and increasingly by the late 1970s, the lumpenproletariat became a focus for a libratory politics of difference and heterogeneity (435-37). This is echoed in Slothrop's meditations on the counter-theology of his ancestor, William Slothrop, whose *On Preterition* leads Tyrone to wonder: "Suppose the Slothropite heresy had had 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?" (555-56). Mercy, as Webley Silvernail makes clear, is in short supply.

In its heterogeneous disorder, its promiscuous mixture of genres, its apparent incoherence, and its celebration of "alternative lowlife," *Gravity's Rainbow* is an exemplary lumpen text. Its uncontainable cast of heterogeneous lumpen characters is as unassimilable as its plot. As Spengler notes, the actions of the imperial culture constitutes History, while the actions of the fellahin amount to no more than "a planless happening without goal . . . wherein

occurrences are many, but, in the last analysis, devoid of signification" (170-71). Ironically, as the representatives of the great powers hold their historic meeting to discuss the carving up of postwar Europe, lumpen Slothrop, in pursuit of mindless pleasures rather than participating in significant plans, is hiding from the guards and scratching around in the bushes looking for dope. In the Zone, there is a sense in which almost everyone is reduced to lumpen status, living outside the law because there is no law in effect. Without official structures in place, people instead have "arrangements": as Geli Tripping tells Slothrop, "It's so unorganized out here. There have to be arrangements. You'll find out" (290). Some arrangements take place on the scale of History, such as the arrangement that leads to a provisional government in Germany, but most, "[n]o more or less real . . . [remain] private, silent, and" like the "planless happenings" of the lumpens themselves, "lost to History" (291).

Images of waste are inevitably associated with the lumpens, from Marx's "scum, offal and refuse" comments onwards, in a tendency to connect unproductive and unusable people with literal waste and garbage. Similarly, references to garbage and body wastes are certainly not infrequent in *Gravity's Rainbow*, and the circumstances range from the sublime to the ridiculous. At one point, for example, Slothrop (a.k.a. Rocketman at this point, and dressed in a pig costume) is hidden in a garbage dumpster beneath "a pile of eggshells, beer cans, horrible chicken parts in yellow gravy, coffee grounds and waste paper" (598). Waste, by definition, is not subject to the violations that are a consequence of usefulness. If, as Webley Silvernail emphasizes, They are willing to use every form of life without mercy to further Their own interests, one strategy, then, is to be useless. "To be unique or grotesque, a cartoon figure, an obsessive," writes Jameson, "is also . . . not to be usable in efficient or instrumental ways" (101). Not being usable, in these circumstances, can be the closest thing to safety that remains available. Leni Pökler's "early dream" for her daughter Ilse is that "She will not be used" and this aspiration is connected to the hope—"never quite to be extinguished"—that "a few small chances for mercy" may persist (610). On the next page, this hope is juxtaposed with a scene in which Tchitcherine is told that he is considered "useful," and the implications are immediately obvious: "It was a death sentence" (611).

In a 1969 essay, Susan Sontag acknowledged that those in power are themselves the "living dead," adding that in a culture dominated by the "inorganic, dead, coercive, authoritarian, it becomes a revolutionary gesture to be alive." This echoes Webley Silvernail's plea for being "simply here, simply alive," but the question then becomes how to assert life within a culture of death, whether a political response could ever be effective. "The revolutionary response," Sontag continues, "can't be sabotage: blowing up the great corporate institutions. We are too few, too divided; and the violence they monopolize is formidable" (186). It is interesting to note that Sontag rejects violent revolution not on principle but due to insufficient means. The solution instead lies

elsewhere: in lifestyle, in culture—perhaps counterculture. Sontag concludes that “Bending the mind and shaking loose the body makes someone a less willing functionary of the bureaucratic machine. Rock, grass, better orgasms, freaky clothes, grooving on nature . . . unfits, maladapt, a person for the American way of life.” In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, of course, while direct references to rock music would be slightly anachronistic, drugs, sex, outlandish attire, and nature are frequent preoccupations, and the American way of life is the subject of considerable critique. Still, however imperfect it may have been as a political strategy, one widespread postwar response was a willed anomia of unfitness and maladaptation, uselessness and waste—a lumpen way of life.

The inefficient and non-productive nature of the eccentric lumpen bohemians is one of their defining traits, and Georges Bataille associates this directly with unassimilable heterogeneity:

the *heterogeneous* world includes everything resulting from unproductive expenditure (sacred things themselves form part of this whole). This consists of everything rejected by *homogeneous* society as waste. . . . [T]he waste products of the human body and certain analogous matter . . . the numerous elements or social forms that homogeneous society is powerless to assimilate . . . those who refuse the rule. (142)

When, toward the end of the novel, the fledgling Counterforce begins to assert itself, it is logical that it does so through, as Bataille puts it, the waste products of the human body. “We piss on their rational systems,” declares Osbie Feel, and Roger Mexico not only urinates on the board room table where They are in the process of making decisions—no doubt merciless decisions—he urinates even on the merciless people sitting there. He and Seaman Bodine—a lumpenproletarian *par excellence* if ever there was one—then disrupt a dinner party with a prodigious display of filthy humor, disgusting most of the guests with their litany of menstrual marmalade, snot soup, mucous mayonnaise and so on. And, presiding over the gathering, there is the presence of Brigadier Pudding. Though deceased, he is nonetheless a member of the counterforce and his remarkable appetite for human feces earns him a special place in the pantheon of lumpen waste imagery.

One problem that arises concerns the effectiveness of this lumpen counterforce. Given the destructive power of Them, an important point conceded by Sontag, one would nevertheless like to believe that the counterforce has some means of acting effectively against Their merciless use (and abuse) of all the animate and inanimate forms They encounter. And further, one would like to think that the marked tendency They demonstrate to exhaust and destroy everything could be thwarted. But the counterforce is not in a good “position to disarm, de-penis and dismantle the Man” (712), Pynchon writes, and if we look back to the history of debates about the lumpenproletariat, it is difficult

to maintain much hope. Marx was scathing in his condemnation, arguing that if the lumpens have any political potential at all, it is more likely to be manifested in support of reactionaries, the extreme right. Since by definition it is impossible to organize them around any productive long-term strategy, their political potential is, in any case, quite limited—another manifestation of their uselessness. If any political position could be ascribed to them at all, it would most likely be some very loose form of anarchism—a position which does seem to have appealed to Pynchon. Pirate Prentice admits that the Counterforce may amount to no more than a delusion and perhaps the fate of Byron the Bulb is what awaits: knowing, but powerless to do anything about it. He burns on in the “poor sections, Jewish sections, drug, homosexual, prostitute, and magic sections” (651–52) of the city—that is, the lumpen zones—and his youthful dreams of organizing resistance have been abandoned.

Despite Marx’s critique of the lumpens, the cultural and political possibilities afforded by the existence of lumpen zones were examined very seriously in the postwar period. As Nicholas Thoburn observes, the lumpen refusal of work in any organized form and their position outside bourgeois morality and respectability seemed to indicate that an oppositional mode was in effect (435). If, as Herbert Marcuse maintained in *One-Dimensional Man*, the homogeneity of modern culture compromised the very possibility of serious social critique, the persistence of lumpen spaces, even within totalitarian regimes, appeared to provide increasingly rare dimensions in which alternative thoughts and behaviors could at least persist. Marcuse argues that while “the substratum of the outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colors, the unemployed and the unemployable” (256) is at best politically unstable, this lumpen refuse nonetheless “exist[s] outside” and “violates the rules.” The distance between the leftist agenda for the lumpens and their actual behavior becomes clear in Marcuse’s observation that the “their opposition is revolutionary even if their consciousness is not” (256).

The possibility that lumpen alienation might eventually turn to revolutionary consciousness was nonetheless an important concern for some radical groups in the 1960s. Without the established proletariat in the colonial context, Frantz Fanon had little choice but to place his hope in the lumpens—particularly those uprooted by colonialism and migrating in great numbers to the emerging shanty-towns. “It is within this mass of humanity,” he writes in *The Wretched of the Earth*, “at the core of the lumpen-proletariat, that the rebellion will find its urban spearhead. For the lumpen-proletariat . . . constitutes one of the most spontaneous and radically revolutionary forces” (103). Similarly, in the 1960s, the Black Panthers, who were well aware of Fanon’s work, did not have much of a proletarian base from which to recruit, but did have access to a huge number of what subsequently came to be called the underclass—criminals, drug dealers and so on. As they struggled to strategize

a way forward, there were many intense debates within Panther circles about the potential for mobilizing the lumpens. There was even a Motown-style pop band made up of Panther members called The Lumpens, who substituted radical lyrics for the apolitical content that filled the charts—an impulse to make pop lyrics that would have interested Pynchon perhaps. But in the end, the problems with the authorities that the Panthers ran into in their attempts to organize effective resistance were exacerbated by their own lumpen roots as drugs and violence weakened their position. As Fanon argued, the lumpens, including pimps, hooligans, prostitutes, and petty criminals, are “like a horde of rats: you may kick them and throw stones at them, but despite your efforts they’ll go on gnawing at the roots of the tree” (104). This is clearly a kind of oppositional position, but—despite Fanon’s hopes—not necessarily one from which alternative political structures can be built.

The closed system of modernity, as so many postwar writers perceived it, allowed few opportunities for significant opposition. In general, its centripetal pull holds us inside the homogenizing system of control where we continue to be “who the Caesars say [we] are” (GR 136). Despite our attempts at resistance, it most often remains the case that “the Man has a branch plant in each of our brains,” and that despite everything “They will use us” and “We will help legitimize Them” (712-13). Bataille, in the passage cited earlier, refers to the relation of the sacred to the zones of waste and refuse, human (lumpen) and otherwise, and this is manifested in *Gravity’s Rainbow* as well—both in the references to the Angels but also in the many references to magic. Tyrone Slothrop, at one point, tries a lumpen spell of his own—a counter-spell really that sums up some essential spirit of lumpen philosophy: “‘Fuck you.’ whispers Slothrop. It’s the only spell he knows, and a pretty good all-purpose one at that” (203). It may even have the power to ward off death itself, Pynchon suggests in the opening scene (10). On the other hand, it may just be useless lumpen cursing.

—Carleton University

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