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Abstract

Matthias Mösch

“The Faust Myth in William Gaddis and Thomas Pynchon: Postmodern Negotiations of Western Modernity”

This thesis examines the Faust myth in post-war American fiction, giving special consideration to works of William Gaddis and Thomas Pynchon.

The main texts analysed are Gaddis's *The Recognitions* (1955) and Pynchon's *V.* (1963) and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). I present these works, which are underrepresented in broader studies of the literary tradition of the myth, as substantial contributions to the latter, while demonstrating how their thematic and stylistic proximity can be explained through their use of the myth itself. I thereby meet two desiderata: a location of Gaddis's and Pynchon's Faustiana in specific currents of twentieth-century intellectual history and a qualitative comparison between both authors against the background of postmodern mythography.

Locating their works in the tradition of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Thomas Mann, I analyse how both authors employ the myth in order to satirise the underbelly of Western modernity. In turning the myth against the founding principles of America itself, they suggest that the vision of a New Eden has been a Faustian wager from the start. In doing so, they transform the image of the heretical soul-seller into that of a representative of the dominant forces of their time. Playfully demonising the reckless individualism, technicism, and voracious materialism of their contemporaries, they provide an astonishingly differentiated portrait of human self-aggrandisement that reverts into mechanisms of dehumanisation, a feat that is reflected in their manifest use of the works of Oswald Spengler, Max Weber, Eric Voegelin, Norman O. Brown, and Herbert Marcuse.

While Gaddis's and Pynchon's early novels remain a matter of negative theology in refraining from providing totalising suggestions as how to fare with the sold 'soul' of the West, I argue that these satirical disputes, via their use of apophaticism, indirection, and allusive complexity, convey a distinctly ethical message that speaks against the alleged nihilism and relativism of postmodern fiction.

The Faust Myth in William Gaddis and Thomas Pynchon:
Postmodern Negotiations of Western Modernity

Volume 1 of 1
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Ph.D.

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List of Abbreviations

- AA Gaddis, William. *Agapē Agape and Other Writings*. London: Atlantic Books, 2002.
- CH Kracauer, Siegfried. *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966.
- CR Roberts, Alexander, and James Donaldson, eds. *Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, vol. 3, *Tatian, Theophilus, and the Clementine Recognitions*. Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1867.
- DE Adorno, Theodor W., and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Translated by John Cumming. London/ New York: Verso, 1997.
- DF Mann, Thomas. *Doctor Faustus*. Translated by John E. Woods. New York: Vintage, 1999.
- DW Spengler, Oswald. *The Decline of the West*. Translated by Charles Francis Atkinson. 2 Vols. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926-1928.
- EC Marcuse, Herbert. *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*. London: Routledge, 1998.
- F Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Faust: Part One*. Translated by David Luke. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- . *Faust: Part Two*. Translated by David Luke. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- GR Pynchon, Thomas. *Gravity's Rainbow*. London: Penguin, 1995.
- JR Gaddis, William. *J R*. London: Atlantic Books, 2003.
- LB Brown, Norman O. *Love's Body*. New York: Vintage, 1966.
- LD ---. *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1970.
- MM Mann, Thomas. *The Magic Mountain*. Translated by H.T. Lowe-Porter. Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1973.
- ODM Marcuse, Herbert. *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. Introduced by Douglas Keller. London: Routledge, 2002.
- TR Gaddis, William. *The Recognitions*. London: Atlantic Books, 2003.
- WMA Huizinga Johan. *The Waning of the Middle Ages: A Study of the Forms*

of Life, Thought, and Art in France and the Netherlands in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries. Hammondswoth: Penguin, 1976.

V. Pynchon, Thomas. V. London: Vintage: 2000.

Statement of Copyright

The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. No quotation from it should be published without the author's prior written consent and information derived from it should be acknowledged.

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So much has been written about me that I no longer know who I am.

—Paul Valéry, *My Faust*¹

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This is for Conny, who might guess why.

¹ Paul Valéry, *Plays*, trans. David Paul and Robert Fitzgerald (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960), 14.

Chapter attributions

Sections from chapters 1, 5, 6, and 7 are published as “The Spectre of Faust in the Early Work of Thomas Pynchon”, *Profils Américains: Thomas Pynchon*, ed. Gilles Chamerois and Bénédicte Fryd. Montpellier: Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée (in print).

Introduction

[I]n the absence of any ethical standards external to your belief and love in God, the danger is always lurking that you will use your love of God as the legitimization of the most horrible deeds.

—Slavoj Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*²

But the novel's task, unlike that of history, is to stretch our intellectual, spiritual and imaginative horizons to breaking point.

—Christine Brooke-Rose, "Palimpsest History"³

My thesis traces the employment of the Faust myth in American postmodern fiction, specifically the works of William Gaddis and Thomas Pynchon. This project is a scholarly desideratum in two respects. Firstly, Gaddis's *The Recognitions* (1955), Pynchon's *V.* (1963), and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) are hardly treated in overviews of American Faustiana despite their obvious connection to the myth.⁴ Secondly, despite their thematic and formal proximity, these works have not yet been compared sufficiently in qualitative terms. While critics, for instance Tony Tanner, have frequently pointed to Gaddis's possible influence on Pynchon, actual examinations are sparse.⁵ Given the copious intersections between the latter's thematic focal points,

² Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*, ed. Creston Davis (Cambridge, Mass./ London: MIT Press, 2009), 270.

³ Christine Brook-Rose, *Stories, Theories and Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 189.

⁴ The only overviews of the literary Faust tradition including discussions of Gaddis and Pynchon are Paul Goetsch, *Machtphantasien in englischsprachigen Faustdichtungen: Funktionsgeschichtliche Studien* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2008) and William E. Grim, *The Faust Legend in Music and Literature*, vol. 2 (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992). Brief treatments of American Faustiana can be found in Osman Durrani, *Faust: Icon of Modern Culture* (Robertsbridge: Helm, 2004); Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Criterion Books, 1960); David Hawkes, *The Faust Myth*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Cathy Waegner, "Der Teufel im American Dream. Zur Fausttradition in der Neuen Welt", *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 17, no. 66 (1987): 61-84; Theodore Ziolkowski, *The Sin of Knowledge: Ancient Themes and Modern Variations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁵ Tony Tanner, *Thomas Pynchon* (London/ New York: Methuen, 1982), 90. One of the few publications examining relations between Gaddis and Pynchon is Steven Moore, "'Parallel, Not Series': Thomas Pynchon and William Gaddis", *Pynchon Notes* 11 (1983): 6-26. The following works compare both authors more or less briefly: Gregory Comnes, *The Ethics of Indeterminacy in the Novels of William Gaddis* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), 6-7; Frederick R. Karl, "Gaddis: A Tribune of the Fifties", in *In Recognition of William Gaddis*, ed. John Kuehl and Steven Moore (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1984), 174-98; Thomas Moore, *The Style of Connectedness: "Gravity's Rainbow" and Thomas Pynchon* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1987), 20-21; Elaine B. Safer, *The Contemporary American Comic Epic* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989); Nicholas Spencer, *After Utopia: The Rise of Critical Space in Twentieth-Century American Fiction* (Lincoln/ London: University of Nebraska Press, 2006); Brian Stonehill, *The Self Conscious Novel: Artifice in Fiction from Joyce to Pynchon* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988); Steven Weisenburger, *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel, 1930-1980* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995).

it is astonishing that so little critical attention has been paid to the middle ground between plain dismissals and paranoid musings.⁶ Indeed, the relationship between these works, a *Künstlerroman* and two novels concerned with war and technology, may better be described in terms of contiguity than direct succession. What binds them together is not merely a deep engagement with sanctimonious religiosity, cultural entropy, and the dehumanising effects of capitalism and repressive techniques.⁷ Being of the conviction that the question of lineage is closely related to that of mythography, I contend that their novels are firmly located in the Faust tradition and that a reading through the lens of the myth not only provides a viable means of conceptualising the latter's complexity and diversity but also addresses substantial 'linking features' between them. The two tasks I pursue in the following are therefore to argue that both author's works need to be considered as crucial twentieth-century contributions to the literary Faust tradition and to demonstrate how the vast array of thematic concerns shared by Gaddis and Pynchon is manifest precisely in their use of this myth.

The principle of my analysis is 'bottom up'. Rather than pressing Gaddis's and Pynchon's works into the service of theory, I establish, by working from within the primary texts, a network of relations to the intellectual and literary histories indebted or at least strongly contiguous to the myth of the soul-seller.⁸ My close readings therefore focus on relations to literary sources ranging from the fourth-century *Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions* and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust* (1808,

⁶ As regards wild speculations, the most notable claim was made by 'Wanda Tinasky' (presumably Thomas Donald Hawkins), who proclaimed that the "novels of Gaddis and Pynchon were written by the same person". T. R. Factor, ed., *The Letters of Wanda Tinasky*, (Portland: Vers Libre, 1996), 48. In terms of dismissive readings, Thomas Moore's is paradigmatic. Stating that *The Recognitions* "lacks Pynchon's scientific and occult interest" (*The Style of Connectedness*, 20-21), he dismisses Gaddis as a potential precursor of Pynchon, ignoring the former's extensive treatment of science, technology, alchemy, and heresiology.

⁷ I refer to *technique* here as the rational organisation of information, materials, and humans alike for the sake of efficiency and control; cf. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Random House, 1964), xxv.

⁸ Gaddis's debut, as Joseph Conway points out, "may be safely contextualized in specific Euro-American currents of early to mid-twentieth century intellectual history", a proposition valid for Pynchon's *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow* as well. Joseph Conway, "Failing Criticism: *The Recognitions*", in *William Gaddis, "The Last of Something": Critical Essays*, ed. Crystal Alberts *et al.* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2010), 85. Joseph Tabbi makes a similar call for investigating into the Gaddis's relations to European literary traditions: "William Gaddis and the Autopoiesis of American Literature", *Paper Empire: William Gaddis and the World System*, ed. Joseph Tabbi and Rone Shavers (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007), 90-117. For the intellectual tradition of Pynchon see, amongst others, David Cowart, *Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), who points to literary relations, and Moore (*The Style of Connectedness*, 198), who discusses relations to Weber, Arendt, and others.

1832) to Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (1924) and *Doctor Faustus* (1947) as well as the critical history surrounding these, as formulated, for instance in Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (1918, 1923), Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1920), and Norman O. Brown's *Life Against Death* (1958). The prominence of these intertexts and the relative marginality of Christopher Marlowe's *Faustus* indicate that Gaddis and Pynchon draw from a legacy of the myth that transforms the heretical soul-seller into a representative of the industrial, economic, and cultural hegemony in the West. Emphasising the socio-political dimension of devilish bargains, they provide an ideological critique of modern American society, questioning the saintliness, if not sanity of God's 'chosen' people. In this respect, Gaddis and Pynchon follow the agendas of Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville, satirising the hubristic individualism and materialism of their contemporaries and relating both to the Puritan Covenant and its secular offspring, the American Dream.⁹ In an equal measure, they portray their own culture as paradigmatic of wider currents in Western modernity, which relates them intimately to the works of Goethe and Mann. Although it would be an overstatement to say that Gaddis and Pynchon aim to better the reader, as Gregory Comnes argues in Gaddis's case in *The Ethics of Indeterminacy* (1994), there is a distinctly ethical core at the heart of these novels that draws its energy from an ambiguity and ironic allusiveness in the tradition of the two German authors.¹⁰ Pynchon's and Gaddis's "serious unseriousness", as Tanner puts it,¹¹ their rhizomatic arrangements, and their aesthetic-ethical concerns are intimately related to Goethe's 'serious jests' and textual mycelia.¹² More crucially, they share with the German poet an ambivalent assessment

⁹ Tanner, for instance, argues that the problems Gaddis explores in *The Recognitions* are "at the heart of American Literature, and in looking back to Hawthorne while it looks ahead to Pynchon, his novel reminds us of the continuities which we might otherwise, perhaps, overlook". Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction, 1950-1970* (London: Cape, 1971), 400; cf. Peter William Koenig, "Recognizing Gaddis' 'Recognitions'", *Contemporary Literature* 16, no. 1 (1975): 71.

¹⁰ For a discussion of Pynchon's ethics see, for instance, Judith Chambers, *Thomas Pynchon* (New York: Twaine, 1992).

¹¹ Tony Tanner, *The American Mystery: American Literature from Emerson to DeLillo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 234. Elaine B. Safer similarly notes that even if Pynchon (and Gaddis) uses absurdity and ghoulish humour, they certainly do not dismiss themselves with a joke (*The Contemporary American Comic Epic*, 49); cf. Michael Bell, who compares Pynchon's humour with that of Mann: "Pynchon no longer aspires to be the ironic but humanistic 'lord of counterpositions', yet there is still a comic race against cynicism which [...] allows a non-cynical laughter to keep barely ahead whatever sinister possibilities may be closing in." Michael Bell, *Literature, Modernism and Myth: Belief and Responsibility in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 210.

¹² See Goethe to Humboldt on 17.3.1832, cited in Albrecht Schöne, ed., *Faust*, by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 2003), 3.391. In many respects, Gaddis and Pynchon's

of modern Western civilization, in which human emancipation has reverted into a machinery of exploitation and social repression. In *Faust*, as Astrida Orle Tantillo observes, Goethe does not only address the achievements and perils of Western modernity in general but also provides, as “insight into the foundational principles of American society and its shortcomings”.¹³ I think the same holds true for the novels of Gaddis and Pynchon that, as Steven Weisenburger notes, continually probe into the “core contradictions and dilemmas of the twin projects ‘America’ and ‘Modernity’”.¹⁴ Eventually, their satirical disputes over the soul of the West, as it were, do also stand in the tradition of Mann, whose *Zeitromane* had long been mistaken as nihilistic.¹⁵ What both authors share with the latter, apart from a complex humanism and playful mythopoeia, is his sharp observations of the interrelation of fiction and ideology, and not least his reservations about intramundane salvation.¹⁶ As such, I contend, they provide a body of work that partly speaks against the alleged break of postmodern literature with traditional mythical themes and forms and against its alleged nihilism and relativism.¹⁷

narratological agenda is already laid out in the literary tradition of *Faust*. Crude humour, encyclopaedic construction, and intertextual excesses are an integral part of many Faustiana. Goethe, the postmodern *avant lettre*, for instance, spoke of his isomorphic arrangement of seeming *membra disjecta* that existed in form of a loose bricolage until its final composition as a rhizome (cf. Schoene, ed., *Faust*, 2:53).

¹³ Astrida Orle Tantillo, *Goethe's Modernisms* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 1.

¹⁴ Steven Weisenburger argues this in Pynchon's case in “Gravity's Rainbow”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon*, ed. Inger H. Dalsgaard, Luc Herman, and Brian McHale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 44.

¹⁵ See Robert S. Ellwood, *The Politics of Myth: A Study of C. G. Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Joseph Campbell* (New York: State University of New York, 1999), 178.

¹⁶ Discussing the “pedagogical dispute over [...] the soul of the West” in *The Magic Mountain*, Mann expressed his animosity toward totalitarianism in aesthetic-ethical terms, relating them to religion and the illusory capacities of his own profession: “Illusion is a matter of art, but a lie is unacceptable, aesthetically and morally, and it is apparent that these two areas of art and truth-telling are more closely related and even to a great extent overlap, contrary to what their respective advocates surely believe”. Thomas Mann, “My Times”, trans. Scott Denham, *New England Review* 27, no. 4 (2006): 199. He concludes with a statement that might be as well Pynchon's: “For in totalitarianism one is not saved by truth (this is not part of its nature at all): rather one is ‘saved by faith,’ by the dictated and forced belief in a single myth that promises salvation” (*ibid.*, 200). This observation resonates deeply in Gaddis, who notes ironically in “Old Foes with New Faces”, for instance, that both priests and writers are “in the same line of business: that of concocting, arranging, and peddling fictions to get us safely through the night”. William Gaddis, *Agapē Agape and Other Writings* (London: Atlantic Books, 2002), 189 (hereafter cited in text as AA).

¹⁷ The thoroughness of the authors' social criticism and their refusal of a firm referential framework in which the latter would be embedded prompted early critics, on whom the satiric character of these novels was lost, to attest a form of nihilism or relativism. This and their ‘difficult’ style, brandished by figures like B.R. Myers, Jonathan Franzen, Jonathan Yardley, and Dale Peck, has given rise to ever recurring debates about authorial obligations and the purpose of fiction in general. While most of these arguments may count as severe cases of deliberate misunderstanding of both authors' thought that writing against totalising worldviews and the tyranny of the straight sense necessitates a certain degree of ambiguity and paradox, the main emphasis of such criticism on stylistic matters also obscures the substantial ethical-aesthetical critique they provide to the favour of matters of marketability. For details

The introductory part of my thesis examines what I would like to term the ‘dialectic of demonization’. I present the myth of the soul-seller as an exercise in ideology employed by both representatives of an ascending Christian hegemony and its critics as a means to demonise and depoliticise competing worldviews and social practices. I show that this modern myth is predominantly used to negotiate core principles of Western modernity in general and the rise of Northern America as a world power in particular.

Chapter 1: After clarifying the concept *myth* in relation to ideology and literature and discussing early uses of the Faust figure as a site of power struggles between different religious and scientific world views, I show how the representation of the magus-scholar shifted in a secularised framework from damnable heretic and epicurean rogue to a figure operating in mutual agreement with the dominant forces of his time. I do so by analysing what is arguably the most influential literary version of the myth, Goethe’s *Faust*. Drawing from Georg Lukács and Marshall Berman, I demonstrate how the two parts of this epic drama assess the human quest for self-creation and development by means of ‘magic’, money, and technology in distinctly ethical and aesthetical terms. I then demonstrate how the German philosopher of history Spengler expanded Goethe’s vision into a morphological world history that presents Western modernity as a Faustian age, in which man, attempting to realise the dream of ultimate mastery, inevitably becomes enslaved to his creations. Explaining the deterministic nature of this portrait of history, I show why Spengler’s work appealed not only to thinkers like Martin Heidegger or Theodor W. Adorno but also to Gaddis, Pynchon, and their contemporaries, who found evidence of its apocalyptic propositions throughout the affluent society in post-war America and could perceive it as a counter-narrative to that of Manifest Destiny.

Against this background I will give a brief overview of North American Faustiana in the second chapter. After showing how stories about deals with the devil were employed as tools of social mastery in Puritan settlements, I argue that the emergent American literary tradition of the myth used Faust as a means to re-evaluate the vision of a New Eden, criticising their forefathers’ sanctimonious attitude towards salvation, their harsh materialism, and the social imbalance engendered by their work ethic.

on the debate see Rone Shavers, “The End of Agape: On the Debate around Gaddis”, in *Paper Empire: William Gaddis and the World System*, ed. Joseph Tabbi and Rone Shavers (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007), 161-81.

Discussing the reception of Goethe's and Spengler's works among authors such as Karl Schapiro, Norman Mailer, and Jack Kerouac, I then present the continuation of this critical tradition in American thought and literature throughout the twentieth century. In an accompanying excursus on the socio-historical works of Weber and Eric Voegelin I argue that the vision of the community of God's chosen people residing in a shining 'city upon a hill' can indeed be read as a Faustian narrative.

Part II discusses how Gaddis uses the Faust myth in his debut novel and some of his critical writings in order to satirise the religious dogmatism and the 'grab all you can' mentality of American post-war society. Revising earlier Gaddis scholarship, I argue for the centrality of the myth in this postmodern artist's novel by observing its two main intertextual strands, the *Clementine Recognitions*, an early Christian romance, and Goethe's *Faust*, before setting them into relation with the most obvious (yet least textually present) candidate for comparison, Mann's *Doctor Faustus*.

Chapter 3: In an analysis of the religious and social dimensions of the novel, I elucidate how Gaddis challenges Protestant soteriology and predestinationist dogmata by means of the story of Simon Magus, the first Faust figure in Christian heresiology, as conveyed in the *Clementine Recognitions*. Satirising the New England 'culture of guilt', which is held to account for fostering authoritarian habits and social rifts, Gaddis traces the 'malformation' of the novel's protagonist, Wyatt Gwyon, a lapsed Protestant and unsuccessful painter.

Chapter 4: The main part of my discussion of Gaddis examines the artistic dimension of the novel, tracing how the young artist at his wits' end turns to the very systems engendering his sense of alienation. Making a pact with a ring of art dealers, he comes to find the parameters of perfection he is missing in both art and society by forging Renaissance masterpieces. Reading this wager from the perspective of Mann's novel, I argue that the very sense of depravity as induced by his Puritan upbringing lures Wyatt into collaborating with the 'devils' of capitalism, while a misconstrued sense of vocation (in Weberian terms) enables him to delude himself into the role of a redeemer of art. A final section examines how the novel's protagonist breaks free from his bargain by engaging in an artistic *modus operandi* between ivory tower and commoditisation and turning to an 'agapistic' ethics.¹⁸

¹⁸ For a brief definition of agapē see Paul Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, trans. David Pellauer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), 220-24. For the concept of agapistic communities

The third part of my thesis treats the Faust myth in the early work of Pynchon. I argue that *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow* are considerably shaped by the myth despite their subtleness as regards allusions to other Faustiana. Observing the author's use of 'secondary' sources, such as Spengler's vision of decline, Mann's *Magic Mountain*, and Brown's psychoanalytical reading of history, all of which considerably draw from Goethe, I argue for a deliberate method of indirection in accord with Pynchon's radical resistance to totalising concepts, including that provided by mythology.

Chapter 5: An opening analysis of Pynchon's debut novel *V.* highlights the intersection between Pynchon's and Gaddis's concerns, especially in terms of a scathing socio-cultural analysis of post-war America, while laying the ground for the political focus of Pynchon's work. Discussing the use of allusions to Goethe and Mann in the stories of two main characters in *V.*, I examine how ontologically and epistemologically alienated subjects willingly surrender their humanity to objects and abstractions in order to bypass their frailty and existential rootlessness.

Chapter 6: The major part of this section is dedicated to Pynchon's *magnum opus*, *Gravity's Rainbow*. My central concern here lies with the author's depiction of the German (and implicitly American) military-industrial complex as a suicidal 'System' that follows a Spenglerian narrative of entropic decline. After discussing the Faustian machineries and mechanisms emergent in the novel, I provide an analysis of the most Faustian of Pynchon's characters, the rocket engineer and SS officer Weissmann, whose quest for transcending the limitations of the *conditio humana* reiterates the lethal logic of the 'System', of which he is part and parcel. In my discussion I reassess traditional positions in Pynchon scholarship by demonstrating how the author uses allusions to Goethe and Rainer Maria Rilke in order to valorise this quest in ethical terms. Finally, I analyse the way in which Pynchon subverts anti-Faustian narratives, in particular those propounded by Brown, in order to demystify the jargon of American countercultural movements.

In a concluding step I examine how Pynchon negotiates the question of complicity in the vitae of three seemingly innocent characters, the engineers Kurt Mondaugen and Franz Pöckler and the American lieutenant and 'protagonist' of the novel, Tyrone Slothrop. Discussing relations between *V.*, *Gravity's Rainbow* and Mann's *Magic Mountain*, I argue that Pynchon provides a lucid political allegory of the Faustian pact

in Gaddis, see Birger Vanwesenbeeck, "Art and Community in William Gaddis's *The Recognitions*", *Mosaic* 42/3 (2009): 150-52.

Germany made in the chaotic atmosphere of the Weimar Republic, showing how humans suffering from their own limitations are gathered into a totalitarian order and all too readily give away their soul to pursue their dreams of escape. In the main part of this section I extend the discussion of complicity by examining Faustian connections to the Puritan culture that forms the subtext of Pynchon's criticism. After showing how *Gravity's Rainbow* indicts the Protestant work ethic and the nascent New England industry because of its creation of power imbalances and the transformation of nature as *alma mater* into a necropolis, I critically reconsider one of Pynchon's most prominent reprobates, the antihero and sexual adventurer Tyrone Slothrop. Showing Pynchon's employment of elements from Goethe, Brown, and, again, *The Magic Mountain*, I analyse this character as a microcosmic representative of a young disempowered generation of Americans that forfeits the possibility of gaining a 'soul'. Exposing the contradictions of Slothrop's scavenger hunt for military supremacy in the post-war 'Zone', I argue that this forfeiture is not solely a matter of internalised repression or indoctrination but also a failed emancipation, a wilful suspension of human responsibilities that is as double-minded as that of the Fascist engineers.

Conclusion: After pointing out the main intersections between Gaddis's and Pynchon's works and summarising the specifics of their mythical agenda, I discuss both authors' indications as regards alternatives to the Faustian condition. I argue that despite notions of 'selves-who-can-do-more' or 'keeping cool but caring', *The Recognitions, V.*, and *Gravity's Rainbow* remain instances of a negative theology. They concur with Léon Brunschvicg's dictum "[a]s long as you think only salvation, you turn your back on God",¹⁹ yet they suggest no religious agenda against such egotism. Not capable anymore of Goethe's belief in the fundamental goodness of man or even Mann's ironic humanism, their peculiar Jeremiads suggest only few 'better ways'. Refusing to succumb to cynicism or plain condemnation, however, they pass on the slow hard work of ethical commitment to the reader.

¹⁹ Cited in Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 48.

Part I: The Dialectic of Demonization

Chapter 1: Faust and the Forces of Modernity

[T]here is no surer index of creative power than the creature's refusal to submit or remain constant to his creator's intentions. The greater the creature's life, the greater his freedom. His very rebellion exalts his author: God knows...

—Paul Valéry, "To the Wary but not Unwilling Reader"²⁰

1. Faust between Myth and Ideology

Although the objects of examination in this thesis are literary texts, it would be naïve to examine a myth so thoroughly subjected to theological, political, and (counter-)cultural uses solely from the perspective of literary studies. Myths do not exist as pure versions but only in mediated form, and as such they primarily have a social function.²¹ Myths are 'foundational stories', to employ Jan Assmann's definition, stories told to illuminate the present from the past, irrespective of the facticity of this past.²² As a means of making sense of the world, their archaeological and teleological meaning provides orientation and conveys a set of idealised behaviour patterns, thereby serving as a normative and formative agent that pronounces order and helps in establishing or maintaining communities.²³ Not taken as a heuristic taxonomy, or as an epistemological or moral yardstick, however, myths can become reified and "misconstrued as an actual materialistic explanation of the world".²⁴ Since myths establish a world-view that does not allow for "the kind of criticism and argumentation that we associate with the term rational",²⁵ they lend themselves to dogmatic uses as a means to depoliticise, naturalise, and universalise beliefs, to "render them self-evident and apparently inevitable".²⁶ In such cases, as the

²⁰ Valéry, *Plays*, 3.

²¹ See Stephanie Wodianka, "Zur Einleitung: 'Was ist ein Mythos?' - Mögliche Antworten auf eine vielleicht falsch gestellte Frage", in *Mythosaktualisierungen: Tradierungs- und Generierungspotentiale einer alten Erinnerungsform*, ed. Stephanie Wodianka and Dietmar Rieger (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006), 5.

²² Jan Assmann, *Das Kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (München: Beck, 1999), 52, 143.

²³ Karl Simms, *Paul Ricoeur* (London: Routledge, 2003), 58. Hence, Frank Kermode distinguishes myths from fictions, considering the former agents of stability and the latter agents of change. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 39.

²⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, ed. Mario J. Valdš (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf), 19, 487.

²⁵ John B. Thompson, *Studies in the Theory of Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 286.

²⁶ Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991), 5.

history of myths and their appropriations shows, what is meant to *illuminate* the world can all too easily revert into deliberate obscurantism, from which scholarship is by no means exempt.²⁷ For these reasons I refrain from using typologies devised by Northrop Frye, Joseph Campbell, or C. G. Jung and follow Bruce Lincoln in considering myth as “ideology in narrative form” instead.²⁸

Although the story of Faust is relatively young, emergent at approximately the same time as that of Don Quixote and Don Juan, it has, perhaps more frequently than any other myth, become an arena of ideological negotiations. Half legend, half cautionary tale, it is not aimed at providing a theogony or cosmogony but primarily serves as a test case in eschatological matters.²⁹ Its diabolic core stems from the Bible—God and Satan’s wager on the latter’s ability to pervert a good man (Job 1:6-12), and the temptation of Christ (Matthew 4:1-11)—while the magician part can be traced back to texts that emerged during religious trench fights in the early history of the Church, reaching back as far as Saint Irenaeus’s tract *Adversus Haereses* (ca. 180) and the late fourth-century Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions*, a work hereticising the Gnostic Simon Magus, who was also known by his Latin cognomen Faustus.³⁰ As a story of forbidden fruits, it is related the tales of Epimetheus and Pandora or Adam and Eve but differs from them in that the magician needs no tempter to bring about his own doom, which renders the name Faustus, ‘the favoured one’ or ‘the fortunate’, somehow ironic.

²⁷ Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies* are still valuable works as regards abuses of myth in this respect. For an introductory treatment of ideological ramifications of mythography see Ellwood, *The Politics of Myth*.

²⁸ Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 147. In support of this qualification I would like to add that myth does not stand in contradiction with Louis Althusser’s classic definition of ideology as the “imagined relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence”. Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 109. Both, however, differ in terms of their social function. As Ben Halpern argues, the “social function of myth is to bind together social groups as wholes or, in other words, to establish a social consensus. The social function of ideology is to segregate and serve special interests within societies in the competition of debate”. Ben Halpern, “‘Myth’ and ‘Ideology’ in Modern Usage”, *History and Theory* 1, no. 2 (1961): 137; see Eagleton (*Ideology*, 6) and Roland Barthes, “Myth Today”, in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 1993), 151-54.

²⁹ Although it emerged in form of legends around the mid-sixteenth century, Faust was first termed a “myth” by Jakob Burkhardt 23 years after Goethe’s death, the word *myth* being a modern phenomenon in Western languages appeared in German about 1800 and in English about 1839.

³⁰ E.M. Butler calls the story of Simon Magus the “first fully developed legend of the fortunes and fate of the black magician”. E.M. Butler, *The Myth of the Magus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 73. For further forerunners of Faust see Philip Mason Palmer and Robert Pattison More, *The Sources of the Faust Tradition: From Simon Magus to Lessing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936).

Under the name *Faust* proper, the myth was first popularised in the *Historia von D. Johann Fausten*, published by Johann Spies in Frankfurt am Main in 1587. A doctor in theology fallen in bad company, Faust transgresses his personal horizons with the aid of the devil. He does this on a contractual basis, trading his eternal soul for a 24-year period of epicurean excess, and he follows his desires so relentlessly and stubbornly that it appears that he actively wants to fall.³¹ Approaching the day of his doom, the scholar bitterly laments. However, unable to make the leap of faith “required to ensure his salvation”, he is delivered to the devil, and his death, although gruesome, appears not only ‘justified’ but also ‘deserved’.³² As the author of the *Historia* suggests, the latter is the case not because of Faustus’ sinfulness but because of his *desperatio*, his disbelief in the redeeming power of divine grace.

Child of an era of conflict between spiritualism and materialism, more specifically of discrepancies between Christian ideals and the worldly focus of sciences, the *Historia* is the first literary treatment of a figure symbolic of early modern advances in knowledge.³³ Nevertheless, even though this version of the myth encompasses general Christian beliefs and positions towards emergent scientific paradigms, its Protestant tenor cannot be overlooked. The doctor appears neither as a renaissance man nor a proper precursor of the Enlightenment intellectual but rather as a projection screen of conservative Lutheran attempts to counteract the political aggrandisement of competing religious groups.³⁴ As Gerald Strauss argues, the religious shakeup at the time of Counter Reformation provided unique opportunities to renegotiate cultural attitudes and values on a vast scale, and Lutheran and Reformed institutions seized the opportunity of acculturating the masses to habits and codes of behaviour thought

³¹ This characteristic is highlighted in Christopher Marlowe’s play, whose Faustus “seems almost to take a perverse pride in the conviction of his own unique depravity”. Pauline Honderich, “John Calvin and Doctor Faustus”, *The Modern Language Review* 68, no. 1 (1973): 10.

³² *Ibid.*, 1; see Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, ed. David Kastan (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), 5.1.53-54, 5.2.43, and 5.2.74-75.

³³ Science’s stress on autonomous will to gain insight was irreconcilable with the religious paradigm that all knowledge came from God and the scripture and that belief was a necessary precondition for accessing this knowledge (expressed in Anselm of Canterbury’s *credo ut intelligam*), which gave rise to concerns that scriptural authority might be replaced by that of science. Spies’ Faust represents to some extent this challenge to authority, renouncing his upbringing as a good Christian and appearing publicly as a physician, astrologer and mathematician.

³⁴ See Gerald Strauss, “The Faust Book of 1587”, in *Faust through Four Centuries: Retrospect and Analysis*, ed. Peter Boerner and Sidney Johnson (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1989), 28. For the Lutheran politics behind the *Historia* see Hawkes, *The Faust Myth*, 28-29. For a discussion of the treatment of science in the *Historia* see Albrecht Classen, “New Knowledge, Disturbing and Attractive: The *Faustbuch* and the *Wagnerbuch* as Witnesses of the Early Modern Paradigm Shift”, *Daphnis* 35, no. 3/4 (2006): 515-35.

fitting by the elite: order, reason, and orderly and reasonable conditions of uniformity, orthodoxy, and the authority of the written word.³⁵ Based on the legendary Georg (or Johann) Faust, who likened himself to Simon Magus and held it was not necessary to venerate God since he had godlike powers himself, the *Historia* was not only aimed at condemning non-canonical learning but also written as a vehicle of social formation and against competing soteriological models. Seen as a part of this agenda, the *Historia* fulfilled two purposes, namely to replace plebeian folklore with approved cultural codes and to detach people from alternative religions by ridiculing Catholicism and demonizing “cunning folk” in competition with the Church and its services.³⁶ A standardised story following the aesthetics of saintly legends, yet a distinctly modern narration with claims to facticity and authenticity, it edifies the reader by supplementing Faust’s entertaining misdeeds with the voice of a didactic narrator and thus provides “a negative print with which to identify, an ideal Christian counterpart”.³⁷ In linking vice, disorder, decadence and uncivil behaviour with sorcery and black magic, the *Historia* stands also in the tradition of the so-called *Teufelsbücher*, highly popular tales branding any deviation from the rationales set out as obedient Christian behaviour “as an act of apostasy, ultimately a denial of Christ”.³⁸ The early American reception of the myth, as I demonstrate later, can be understood as an extension of such endeavours.

Although the shift in representations of Faust-characters from trickster to knowledge seeker occurs in the *Historia*, as Theodore Ziolkowski argues,³⁹ it is Christopher Marlowe’s Faustus who is famously associated with a fatal attitude towards curiosity. The ‘hero’ of *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus* (1604, 1616), inspired by the 1592 translation of the chapbook, abandons theology and the canonical sciences, which he regards as too limited, turning to necromantic or ‘damned’ books in order to unlock nature’s treasury and become lord of the elements. Emancipated from religion, the realm of learning here exceeds mere

³⁵ Strauss, “The Faust Book”, 29.

³⁶ See Strauss, “The Faust Book”, 32. As Strauss argues, most offensive to the hegemony were “the religious practices of the ordinary folk. They were superstitious, licentious, disorderly, irrational [...] In every respect they violated the reformers’ elitist ethics of ‘decency, diligence, gravity, modesty, orderliness, prudence, reason, self-control, sobriety, and thrift’” (*ibid.*, 29).

³⁷ Marguerite De Huszar Allen, *The Faust Legend: Popular Formula and Modern Novel* (New York: Peter Lang, 1985), 15, 54.

³⁸ Strauss, “The Faust Book”, 31; see Ziolkowski (*The Sin of Knowledge*, 14) and Hawkes (*The Faust Myth*, 34).

³⁹ Ziolkowski, *The Sin of Knowledge*, 61.

lust for knowledge for its own sake (the *experiendi noscendique libido* condemned by Augustine) and appears as a tool of self-empowerment.⁴⁰ Marlowe's scholar, however, is thereby not simply representative of figures ranging from Giordano Bruno to John Dee. If Peter Sloterdijk argues in the case of Faust that "[w]anting-to-know is an offspring of the desire for power, the striving for expansion, existence, sexuality, pleasure, enjoyment of the self",⁴¹ the knowledge-seeker's allegiance with the 'devil' reflects nothing else but the underbelly of Thomas Hobbes's (and Francis Bacon's) *scientia potentia est*.

While Faust's career in the seventeenth and eighteenth century was confined to puppet plays and occasional allusions, it was satires like Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* (1610) that capitalised on mocking the (self-)deified scholar figure.⁴² The upsurge of sciences as well as the Enlightenment movement sweeping over Europe, however, not only prompted the Romantics to attack the mechanistic, rationalized view of the universe, most famously expressed in William Blake's dread of "single vision and Newton's sleep";⁴³ it also led to a reactivation and revalorisation of the myth. Lord Byron (*Manfred*, 1817), Christian Dietrich Grabbe (*Don Juan and Faust*, 1829), and Nikolaus Lenau (*Faust*, 1836), amongst others, made Faust a heroic transgressor, doomed titan, and obsessive pursuer of love and the infinite.⁴⁴ Romantic Faustiana, however, had more to offer than rebel poses in the tradition of *Manfred* or Klinger's German *Sturm und Drang* novel *Fausts Leben, Thaten und Höllenfahrt* (1791). Friedrich Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*, influential for a range of authors from Goethe to Novalis and Coleridge, offered a model alternative to the clockwork universe, a conception of the world as an organism, permeated by one soul found in nature and

⁴⁰ One exception to the generally critical treatment of the lust for knowledge in the Faust tradition is Lessing's plans for a literary Faust drama and the fragment in his seventeenth *Literaturbrief* (1759). An advocate of Enlightenment, Lessing believed in the "essential incorruptibility and indefinite perfectibility of man" and was convinced that man's misery could be "cured by knowledge" (Butler, *The Fortunes of Faust*, 118).

⁴¹ Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 179.

⁴² See Roselynn D. Haynes, *From Faust to Strangelove: Representations of the Scientist in Western Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 74. Pope's *Dunciad* (1728-42), for instance, attacks the intellectual arrogance of contemporary scientists, and his *Essay on Man* (1733), from which Gaddis draws in *The Recognitions*, points to the shortcomings of natural philosophers and warns against the hubris of those who claim to know divine secrets. Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) mocks the pride of scientists and the representatives of reified Reason and disembodied intellect, the Houyhnhnms, which Hugh Kenner brilliantly discusses in *The Counterfeiters* (1968).

⁴³ Cited in Haynes, *From Faust to Strangelove*, 80. It is worth mentioning that Arthur Mizener discusses Pynchon as a "New Romantic" in "The New Romance", in *The New Romanticism: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Eberhard Alsen (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 79-89.

⁴⁴ See Dabezies, "Faust", 434.

man and determined not by Newtonian mechanics but a dynamic polarity of forces. Crucial in terms of the latter is Goethe's version of the myth. While Goethe gave in Faust's famulus Wagner a new name to cold scientific ambition without real insight into the consequences of one's doings,⁴⁵ he also transformed the swinish epicure and heretic into a character suffering from the diverging narratives of religion, natural philosophy and experimental sciences. His *Faust* crucially differs from earlier versions in that it refrains from condemning its protagonist and making overt religious statements. Turning the oppositional heretic into a representative of nascent personal and social economies, it also dramatizes the emergence of a modern dynamic world system. As Tantillo argues, the text, emblematic of Goethe's general position, thereby describes a dual response to modernity: "a liberal response that promotes faith in progress, secularism, and individualism, and a conservative that views change with suspicion, suffers a sense of loss, and seeks to maintain traditional values".⁴⁶ Since such complex negotiation of human action and erring plays a substantial part in the works of Gaddis and Pynchon (and forms one of the main intertextual reference points), I will now discuss both parts of the dramatic poem in more detail.

2. Faust as a Representative of Western Modernity

Goethe's epic drama, owing more to J.V. Andreae than to Spies or Marlowe, expounds on an epic scale how frustration with the human condition can drive the discontented to an ultimately deluded quest for self-realisation.⁴⁷ In contrast to his literary precursors, Goethe does not present this pursuit as damnable. In the "Prologue in Heaven", God makes his chosen 'servant' (cf. Job 1:8) a test case about the goodness of mankind and thereby also an experimental verification of theodicy.⁴⁸ Betting whether Faust can be brought from the right path with the demon Mephistopheles, who sees nothing but bestiality in human doings, especially those

⁴⁵ As Roselyn Haynes argues, this "image of the scientist as cold, inhuman, and unable to relate to others has been most influential in twentieth-century stereotyping" that, one might add, can still be found in Gaddis and Pynchon (*From Faust to Strangelove*, 91). Haynes refers here to Hawthorne, who popularised the image of the reckless scientist in American literature. *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), *Septimius Felton, or the Elixir of Life* (1871), and his short stories "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment" (1837), "Rappacini's Daughter" (1844), and "The Birthmark" (1845), are written against the unhindered cultivation of destructive rationality and the sacrifice of life for abstract ideals.

⁴⁶ Tantillo, *Goethe's Modernisms*, 3.

⁴⁷ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1993), 57.

⁴⁸ See Sloterdijk's assertion that in *Faust* "[e]volution (progress) is [...] the modern theodicy" (*Critique of Cynical Reason*, 178).

informed by “Reason” (F, 285), God wants to demonstrate that mankind’s aspirations, although erroneous (F, 317), are in essence sanctionable. Commissioned to lure the scholar to his own “downward course” (F, 226), Mephistopheles is therefore not a manifestation of theological ‘evil’ but a force of nihilism in the service of good.⁴⁹ Bound to the superordinate bet with the Lord, the daemon remains a catalyst that merely augments, while ironically questioning, what is already present in this representative of mankind (cf. F, 1659).⁵⁰

2.1. The Questing Self – Goethe’s *Faust, Part One*

At the beginning of the scholar’s tragedy, Faust is intellectually and financially bankrupt (F, 364, 374). In his Gothic vault amidst the mildew of scholasticism he exclaims, reiterating Cornelius Agrippa, that “all our search for knowledge is in vain” (F, 364). Armed with diverse analytical tools that have merely undermined his search for a unifying vision, he cannot find the spirit of life in the networks of specialised sciences, and having developed a culture remote from the totality of life, he bitterly longs for fulfilment. Faust experiences at first hand the logic of science Mephistopheles, here spokesman of the poet, ridicules:

When scholars study a thing, they strive
To kill it first, if it’s alive;
Then they have the parts and they’ve lost the whole,

⁴⁹ The numbers in brackets refer to lines in the following edition: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust: Part One*, trans. David Luke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) and *Faust: Part Two*, trans. David Luke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, both hereafter cited in text as F).

⁵⁰ Mephistopheles is a highly paradoxical figure. His identification as the “strange son of chaos” (F, 1384, 8027) associates him with Erebus. Hence, Marshall Berman describes him in as a representative of the dark side of creativity and divinity, a quality that will come fully to the fore in the second part of *Faust*. Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 1983), 47. Less concerned with Goethe’s allusions, Sigmund Freud finds an especially “convincing [...] equation of the principle of evil with the destructive drive in [...] Mephistopheles”. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. David McClintock (London: Penguin, 2002), 59N2; cf. F, 338-44. Such ‘evil’ is not meant in the Christian sense but related, as Graham Frankland argues, “to the primal drive for a final extinction”, the annulment of the tension between Eros and Thanatos “in absolute gratification, precisely the state which Mephistopheles seeks to induce in Faust”. Graham Frankland, *Freud’s Literary Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 58. Freud’s reading has incited some critics to analyse the demon as a representative of cultural entropy. Jackson, for instance, argues that Mephistopheles’ message is “that there is no absolute meaning in the world, no value, and that [...] all that can be discovered is a sinister *absence of meaning*. ‘His’ ‘demonic’ enterprise consists in revealing this absence, exposing the world’s concealed vacuity” (*Fantasy*, 57). One needs to note, however that the demon appeals here to Faust’s own potential nihilism, for behind the latter’s search lies always the suspicion that the world is only an “empty fake” (F, 2407).

For the link that was missing was the living soul. (F, 1936-39)⁵¹

It is this “soul” Faust sets out to seek. Thus, irreconcilably torn between dependence on earthly sensuous experience and intellectual aspiration, he resorts to “magic’s assistance” (F, 377).⁵²

At first, Faust demands access to a “vision of Nature’s forces/ that bind the world, all its seeds and sources/ And innermost life” (F, 382-82) in the sign of the macrocosm. This holistic vision inspires him, yet it only remains a representation. Faust wants direct access. Conjuring up the Earth Spirit and considering himself equal to it, he rejoices:

I, God’s own image! [...]
The mirror of eternal verity!
I fed upon its light and clarity
Within myself, all mortal limits gone [...] (F, 614-17)

In fact, however, he is unable to bear what is granted to him, quivering at the sight of the spirit and painfully learning that he is neither a god (F, 439) nor an *Übermensch* (F, 490), as he is reminded by the Spirit: “You match the spirit you can comprehend” (F, 512). Goethe, as Berman holds, brings here

the *Übermensch* into being not so much to express modern man’s titanic strivings but rather to suggest that much of the striving is misplaced. Goethe’s Earth Spirit is saying to Faust, Why don’t you strive to become a *Mensch*—an authentic human being—instead.⁵³

Faust’s realisation of his own limitations is so shattering that he is ready to commit suicide. On hearing the sound of Easter bells (F, 769-70), however, which evoke in him memories of love and togetherness, he perseveres. Invigorated, he wants to

⁵¹ Goethe’s mockery does surface in Pynchon’s multiple tropes of separation, usually attributed to mathematical operations and bureaucracies—“It is not death that separates these incarnations, but paper: paper specialties, paper routines”. Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (London: Penguin, 1995), 130 (hereafter cited in text as GR). It also does so in Gaddis’s *The Recognitions*, in which separation more directly attributed to science—“With science you take things apart and then we all understand them, then we can all do them. Get things nice and separated. Then you can be reasonable”. William Gaddis, *The Recognitions* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003), 871 (hereafter cited in text as TR).

⁵² Goethe presents Faust’s frustration as a Manichean inner polarity between two conflicting souls: “In me there are two souls, alas, and their/ Division tears my life in two./ One loves the world, it clutches her, it binds/ Itself to her, clinging with furious lust;/ The other longs to soar beyond the dust/ Into the realm of high ancestral mind” (F, 1112-17).

⁵³ Berman, *All that Is Solid*, 42.

embark “[o]n a new journey to the heaven’s ends”, but rather than following the vision of care and community, he seeks “pure activity in a new sphere” (F, 704-5). This agenda finds its first expression in his retranslation of the Genesis, by which he substitutes “deed” for the “word” that marked all beginning (F, 1237, cf. John 1:1). Faust’s retranslation is partly a substitution of self-gratification for the divine, but the inscription of his own authorship into the sacred text(-ure) also indicates his turn to action that is to be the imperative of his project of becoming a God.⁵⁴ In the bet with Mephistopheles that immediately follows, Faust deposits his soul on the condition that should the demon provide him with the experience of a ‘moment’ (*Augenblick*) worth holding on to, he will forfeit this immortal part of himself.⁵⁵ Here, Faust has in mind not the attainment of “mere pleasure” (F, 1765) but the perpetual “realization, the development of all his individual possibilities”.⁵⁶ In the following tour de force through the little and the big world, Goethe then dramatizes Faust’s hubristic misunderstanding of this natural tendency to develop all one’s potentials.⁵⁷ If man creates and perfects himself through his labour, as Hegel would have it, then the mode of Faust’s self-perfection is irreconcilable with his intentions. Having renounced all that is human in his pact, Faust is told:

Alas, alas,
You have destroyed
The beautiful world!

⁵⁴ Friedrich Kittler argues in this context: if “God—a magnified image of the authorship—manifests himself only for an instant, in the apprehension of his act of writing” the creation, then Faust’s turn to the Bible seeks gratification that “no longer needs to stream into that lack from the unique Source [God] but rather from a text, which substitutes for it”. Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks: 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer and Curtis Cullins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 5, 8.

⁵⁵ See Marc Shell, *Money, Language, and Thought: Literary and Philosophic Economies from the Medieval to the Modern Era* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 84. Turning the classical pact into a dynamic process, in which the outcome is purely defined by the experiences Faust will make, Goethe considerably shifts the power balance between the latter and Mephistopheles and also disposes of the temporal condition. Indeed, Faust’s quest will take a lifetime.

⁵⁶ Georg Lukács, *Goethe and His Age*, trans. Robert Anchor (London: Merlin Press, 1968), 204.

⁵⁷ Faust’s attempted self-deification appears to be motivated by an incapability of being human, and so does his hubristic will to render himself divine dehumanise him. Ulrich Gaier demonstrates how Goethe conveys this by drawing from Marsilio Ficino’s *Theologia Platonica de immortalitate animae*. Ulrich Gaier, ed., *Faust-Dichtungen*, by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1999), 3:114-19. For Ficino, the first aspiration of the soul is toward absolute knowledge and absolute possession, but because both are inaccessible to man due to his natural limitations, this aspiration leads to a never ceasing erring of the soul (the *ingenium divagans* in Andreae’s *Turbo*). The second aspiration of the soul is to become all things, which is expressed in Faust’s attempt to become superhuman and then (in the second part) omni-human. This aspiration is driven by an erotic force inherent in the *conditio humana*, the desire to enjoy all things in fusing with them in a state of immediacy. Faust’s flaw is that he renders this condition programmatic and thereby precludes any spontaneity and immediacy as such.

At a blow of your clenched fist
It falls, struck down
By a demigod, it disappears.
Into the void [...]
Let it be built anew
More splendidly, let it come to birth
Again, within you [...] (F, 1617-21)

When he then proclaims after his signature in blood—

And in my inner self I will embrace
The experience allotted to the whole
Race of mankind; my mind shall grasp the heights
And depths, my heart shall know their sorrows and delights.
Thus I'll expand myself, and their self I shall be,
And perish in the end like all humanity. (F, 1770-75)

—it transpires that his search for the living spirit is superseded by a quest for self-augmentation, in which Faust's ego, as it were, encounters nothing but itself. Tracing affinities between the cultural ideal of individual self-development and socio-economic developments in the emergent modernity, Berman interprets this bet as the demand for a “dynamic process that will include every mode of human experience, [...] and that will assimilate them all into his self's unending growth”.⁵⁸ Faust thereby embraces a set of paradoxes “crucial to the structure of both the modern psyche and the modern economy”, in which everything created and achieved needs to be overcome, if not destroyed, in order to pave the way for new creation and achievement.⁵⁹ However, if restless activity as a means of self-determination (F, 1754-59) thereby becomes the paradigm of winning “that crown of our humanity” (F, 1804), it is also a curse for Faust, who will lose his soul as soon as he ceases to strive: “once I stand still, I shall be/ A slave—yours or no matter whose” (F, 1710-11). His pact has created a paradox. Drawing from magically granted powers, he precludes any organic growth, while his egocentricity and the systemic character of his devotion to immediate experience negates any experience of a *moment*, in which he would be suspended, as such. In order not to lose himself, however, he depends on constant

⁵⁸ Berman, *All that Is Solid*, 40.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 47, see 48.

action and gain.⁶⁰ He thereby hastens from experience to experience, engaged in a dynamic of illimitable accumulation, an “economy of self-development that can transform even the most shattering human loss into a source of psychic gain and growth”.⁶¹ Whether it is Valentin’s life, Margareta’s innocence, or his own love, everything is sacrificed for his sustainment.

2.2. Building a World: Modernity and Its Discontents in *Faust, Part Two*

[T]he most effective subjugation and destruction of man takes place at the height of civilization, when the material and intellectual attainments of mankind seem to allow for the creation of a truly free world.

—Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*⁶²

If *Faust* negotiates the emergence of the modern subject, it is also an allegory of socio-political processes marking occidental modernity. Shifting from the medieval atmosphere of the scholar’s study and ending in the midst of the industrial revolution, as Berman argues, the second part of *Faust* dramatizes the emergence of a “distinctively modern world-system”, a “far-reaching realm of production and exchange, ruled by giant corporate bodies and complex organizations, which Faust’s thought is helping to create”.⁶³

After his devastating romantic endeavours in the first part, Goethe’s scholar again sets out to grasp absolutes. He awakens in the prologue, bathed in the “dew of Lethe” (F, 4629), unburdened of his guilt about Margareta’s death. He has also shed off his old, ‘romantic’ self, broken free from the vaults of the ‘little world’, and now sets out

⁶⁰ Faust’s dilemma relates here to Goethe’s critique of subjective idealism and capitalism that was influential for social theorists, from Schütz to Marx, and also Spengler, who presents Faustian money as a category of thought. Just as the self in Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*, Faust needs a self in action as the primal event of his endeavour to find absolutes. Magic and money thereby increase his radius of action but do not provide stable relations to the world. As much as in the capitalist economy “all goods, services, and energies” are translated “into abstract, pecuniary terms”, as Mumford notes, everything Faust encounters is translated into the economy of his experiencing self. Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine: Technics and Human Development* (New York: Hartcourt, Brace & World, 1966), 274. And just like money’s abstraction from and indifference to reality, Faust’s ruthless egoism knows no limits while nothing he encounters can fulfil him. It is no accident that Goethe places Faust’s first breakdown in the same scenes Mephistopheles introduces paper money at the Emperor’s court, which promptly leads to inflation and political destabilisation. Goethe’s economic critique here reflects his critique of idealist philosophy that, as Marc Shell observes, “operates without material guarantees or substantial securities”. Shell, *Money, Language, and Thought*, 102, cf. 103.

⁶¹ Berman, *All that Is Solid*, 49.

⁶² Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (London: Routledge, 1998), 4 (hereafter cited in text as EC).

⁶³ Berman, *All that Is Solid*, 39.

to master the ‘big world’. Contemplating the nature of ‘supreme existence’, he stares at the sun, ‘seizing’ its energy, but becomes painfully aware that this one source of life is unattainable: “we tried/ To set the torch of life alight—alas/ A sea of flames engulfs us” (F, 4708-10). Dazed, he turns his back on the sun and observes a rainbow instead, in which the pure light of the sun is fractured and the opposites of ‘fire’ and water are ‘united’. In analogy to his failed recognition of Nostradamus’s sign in the first part, Faust again turns from the absolute to earthly activities, considering the rainbow as a symbol, a “mirror” of human activity (F, 725): “Life is ours by colourful refraction”.⁶⁴ Pure light, that is truth, can only be inferred from phenomena, reflections. However, Faust’s vision of the rainbow as a pointer toward the indirect attainment of the fullness of life appears as mistaken as his self-augmentation by means of discreet experiences. The rainbow, as Goethe explains in his *Theory of Colours* (1810), does not represent totality. By analogy, Faust’s endeavours lack the will to harmonious growth.⁶⁵ For Goethe, everything “that man attempts to accomplish, whether it is realized by deed, word, or some way, must arise out of a unity of all his powers; everything partial is objectionable”.⁶⁶ The growth “of the discrete and dominant capacities” in man, then, as Lukács explains, “should be accompanied rather by a harmonious growth of the *whole* man”.⁶⁷ The last scene of *Faust*, specifically the gesture of Gretchen as Penitent, suggests that such development is impossible without conscious love. For Goethe, the passion of individual love, “precisely because it is both the most elementary, the most natural [...], and also, in its present individualized form, the finest fruit of culture”, if taken as an end in itself, represents the “most genuine fulfilment of the human personality”; conversely, an experience of its power “unifies the personality [and] effectually raises everything in man to the highest level attainable”.⁶⁸ Hence, “Eternal Womanhood/ Draws us on high” (F, 12110-11). Faust, however, cannot yet comprehend this and finds his first setback when he conjures up the ‘ideal form’ of beauty, Helen of Troy, and causes an explosion by trying to seize the simulacrum (F, 6561). After a brief

⁶⁴ My translation of “Am farbigen Abglanz haben wir das Leben” (F, 4727). Luke’s “Our life’s a spectrum-sheen of borrowed glory” unnecessarily introduces themes of credit and debit.

⁶⁵ In his anti-Newtonian and alchemically inspired *Theory of Colours* Goethe dismisses the rainbow as a representation of the totality of colours because it misses the highest of all colours, purple (§ 814), which cannot emerge by prismatic refraction. In its ethical-symbolic value, purple signifies the highest achievements of the human spirit.

⁶⁶ Cited in Lukács, *Goethe and His Age*, 231.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁶⁸ Cited in Lukács, *Goethe and His Age*, 220, 221.

Arcadian interlude, Faust then abandons his aesthetic ideals and thrusts himself into ‘real’ action. Distinguishing himself in economics, politics, and warfare, he puts his abilities to a test by creating a world, that is, by deciding to colonise a swampy coast. In contrast to the first part of the tragedy, it is no longer magic that is to establish a path to Nature’s seeds and sources but man’s work alone (cf. F, 11403-07).

Faust becomes a builder, and connecting his personal interests with the economic-political forces that drive the world, he also learns how to destroy. Mephisto and he lend their minds and magic to the emperor to renew his power and obtain *carte blanche* to develop the coastal region. In doing so, Faust tries to find a way to act effectively against the feudal and patriarchal world, to create a new social environment, a new space for a “free people on free land” (F, 11580), who shall engage in pure activity (cf. F, 705). In order to fulfil his vision, he intends to reclaim the “alienated earth” from the sea and rule the “unruly waves” (F, 11541-43). As Tantillo points out, Faust’s drive towards capitalism (and technology) occurs only when he “has given up on the arts, aesthetics, and nature”.⁶⁹ Goethe does not unambiguously condemn the endeavour but is highly critical as to how it is exerted. Once striving to reunite with the living forces of the *alma mater*, Faust now devises an ethical-aesthetical formula for mankind’s “economic and technological struggle for the subjugation of nature”, the realisation of which comes at the cost of human lives, if not an entire paradigm of existence.⁷⁰ Turning the world into a planned garden, Faust is annoyed by the sight of Philemon and Baucis, an old couple who represent the values of the pre-modern world and has them removed as their house stands in the way. The old couple thereby become the “first embodiments in literature of a category of people that is going to be very large in modern history: people who are in the way”,⁷¹ disposed of as obsolete, rendered “dirt”, in Zygmunt Bauman’s terms. If this has distinctly totalitarian implications, Faust’s order of removal, as Berman holds, does even more so, as it represents a “characteristically modern style of evil: indirect, impersonal, mediated by complex organizations and institutional roles”.⁷²

Eventually, the process of development that transforms wasteland into a “thriving physical and social space” is to recreate “the wasteland inside the developer”.⁷³ After

⁶⁹ Tantillo, *Goethe’s Modernisms*, 24, 38.

⁷⁰ Lukács, *Goethe and His Age*, 191.

⁷¹ Berman, *All that Is Solid*, 67.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 67.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 68.

hearing about the killing of Philemon and Baucis, Faust is haunted by Care (*Sorge*), the anxiety of self-preservation, but determined to achieve full self-realisation in the face of death, for better or worse, he dismisses her, and with that, again, his human condition.⁷⁴ Care, however, is itself not easily dismissed and strikes him physically blind:

FAUST [*blinded*].
Night seems to close up upon me deeper still,
But in my inmost soul a bright light shines.
I hasten to complete my great designs:
My words alone can work my mastering will.
Rise from your sleep, my servants, every man!
Give visible success to my bold plan!
Set to work now with shovel and with spade:
I have marked it all out, let it be made!
With a well-ordered project and with hard
Toil we shall win supreme reward;
Until the edifice of this achievement stands,
One mind shall move a thousand hands. (F, 11499-510)

Faust, this modern consciousness, has become blind in a physical sense, has unlearned and lost all sensual perception of the world. As he knows the realm of Care but does not accept it as the limit of his action, his exclusive reliance on the light inside himself then describes a tragic mistake of a modern anthropology no longer based on *religio*.⁷⁵ In his deluded self-apotheosis Faust thus arrogantly likens himself to the Lord in that he believes his will is sufficient to direct a thousand hands, and fleeing Care he hastens to complete his plan, calling his servants to render his idea reality. Blind, however, he depends on helpers and instruments and is also prone to deceit. Hearing the clashing of the spades of his ‘forced labourers’, pressed into service by “[i]nducements, money, force” (F, 11554), he sees his vision, and with that the beautiful moment worth holding onto, fulfilled: “Then to the moment I might say:/ Beautiful moment, do not pass away!” (F, 11581-82). Faust dies, but his plan remains in the realm of the hypothetical, for the sound of activity that prompts him to forfeit his soul is not the start of his project but the digging of his own grave.

⁷⁴ See Gaier, ed. *Faust-Dichtungen*, 3:1082.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.1084. The “bright light” (F, 6804) inside Faust relates to scholastic solipsism but also to the inner light that, according to Luke 11:35, is darkness (Gaier, ed., *Faust-Dichtungen*, 3:1083).

If Faust has partially failed, he is nevertheless spared damnation: “He who strives on and lives to strive/ Can earn redemption still” (F, 11936-37). Adorno may therefore have a point in exposing the violence of such a *deus ex machina*, in which the law (the pact between Faust and Mephistopheles) is suspended in the economy of divine grace, and in which the natural order disappears in an entirely different order, forcing onto the atrocious an intact theodicy.⁷⁶ Hasty dismissals of this absolution do not fully acknowledge the complex humanism negotiated behind the Catholic veil. Faust is received in heaven, where he is to be bettered by the Penitent’s love, not God’s grace. Goethe thereby brilliantly indicates not a last minute pardon but a *modus vivendi*, the content of which, as Lukács argues, “evinces the extension of Goethe’s conception of an eternal perfection of the human race” that implies an “essential pantheistic dialectic of evolution”.⁷⁷ Faust is absolved upon the specific condition that, drawn on high by Eternal Womanhood, his ‘immortal part’ is to be bettered and he himself is to learn how to develop in a human way, to engage in a ceaseless effort to develop and improve himself within the realm of the given, not in a beyond where the soul is laid to rest.

3. Faustian Civilization – Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*

He was [...] a philosopher of culture, whose opinions, however, were directed against culture insofar as he affected to see all of history as nothing but a process of decline.

—Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus*⁷⁸

It is safe to say that Goethe’s play prefigures to a great extent the projects of Weber, Arendt, and Marcuse in dramatizing the coordinates of a disenchanting, economised, industrialised, and bureaucratised ‘second garden’ in which neither grace nor freedom prevail but their opposites. Goethe’s analysis of the modern condition has indeed been glossed with so many critical commentaries that a positive evaluation of his hero has become rare.⁷⁹ The specifically negative connotations of the term *Faustian*, however,

⁷⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 119.

⁷⁷ Lukács, *Goethe and His Age*, 229, 230.

⁷⁸ Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus*, trans. John E. Woods (New York: Vintage, 1999), 295 (hereafter cited in text as DF).

⁷⁹ One exception is Weber’s *Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism*, in which Weber lauds the Faustian universality of man; see Adrian Wilding, “Max Weber and the ‘Faustian Universality of

are mainly rooted in the work of Spengler,⁸⁰ who was the first to provide a comprehensive formulation of the Faustian view of modernity in the two volumes of his immensely popular *The Decline of the West*.⁸¹

Drawing from Goethean morphology, as laid out in *The Metamorphosis of Plants* (1790), Spengler conceived of the world as an organism and its history as a procession of different cultures he conceptualised in terms of life-cycles and annual seasons: rise (spring/adolescence), peak (summer/maturity), fall (autumn/age), and terminus (winter/death). The latter stage of each culture is a *civilization*. Spengler saw his own culture, the origins of which he located not in antiquity but the Middle Ages, as the last stage of the bigger circle. The occident, with its transition from “word” to “deed”, then, is marked by the doings of Faustian man. With his will to power and passion for infinity, Faustian man, who is less inspired by the myth itself than by Nietzsche, knows nothing of pacts but engages in a quest for the augmentation of human power.⁸² Like Wagner, Faust’s famulus, the representative of cold scientific rationality, Faustian man’s “aspirations carry him towards action, technology and conquest”, to applied rather than theoretical knowledge.⁸³ Where Goethe’s scholar longs to be united with nature as *alma mater*, Faustian science and technology perfects the exploitation of nature (DW, 1:301), striving to know her “seeds and sources” (F, 381) in order to incorporate them in a technological apparatus that “delivers sacred Causality over to man” (DW, 2:504). Attempting to bring about the dream of ultimate mastery, however, the Faustian engineer-cum-entrepreneur engages in a destructive endeavour and inevitably becomes “*the slave of his creation[s]*” (DW, 2:504). While markets create a simulacrum, a “second world” (DW, 1:481), the economy-driven machine-industry neither realises human potential nor “liberate[s]

Man”, *Journal of Classical Sociology* 8, no. 1 (2008): 67-87. Another is Ernst Bloch’s *Principle of Hope* (1938-47), which presents Faust as a pursuer of utopian potentials.

⁸⁰ Hawkes, *The Faust Myth*, 167.

⁸¹ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson, 2 vols (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926, 1928, hereafter cited in text as DW).

⁸² Spengler borrowed and oversimplified Nietzsche’s antithesis between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, and supplemented it with the category Faustian (read Promethean) for the modern West. Cf. Harry Lewin, “A Faustian Typology”, in *Faust Through Four Centuries: Retrospect and Analysis*, ed. Peter Boerner and Sidney Johnson (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1989), 9.

⁸³ Dabezies, “Faust”, 436. As Herminio Martins notes, Spengler posited a “conceptual or ontological dependence of science on technology”, a view followed, for instance by Marcuse’s notion of science developing under a “technological *a priori*”. Herminio Martins, “Technology, modernity, politics”, in *The Politics of Postmodernity*, ed. James Good and Irving Velody (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 164. Cf. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, intr. Douglas Keller (London: Routledge, 2002), 165 (hereafter cited in text as ODM).

humanity for more activity” but makes both worker and entrepreneur dependent while exhausting natural resources.⁸⁴ Spengler gives the pithiest summary of this project in *Man and Technology* (1932):

To construct a world for himself, himself to be God—that was the Faustian inventor’s dream, from which henceforth arose all projects of the machines [...]. The concept of the booty of the beast gets thought to the end. Not this or that, like fire, which Prometheus stole, but instead the world itself with the mystery of its force gets dragged into the structure [...]⁸⁵

As these processes are irreversible for Spengler, the “destined end-state of all Faustian ‘nature’” is a decline into stasis. He conceptualises this “Destiny” by means of the second law of thermodynamics (DW, 1:422). Amongst the symbols of decline, he writes,

the most conspicuous is the notion of Entropy, which forms the subject of the Second Law of Thermodynamics. [...] The basic element of the Faustian world-picture is not the Attitude but the Deed and, mechanically considered, the Process and this law merely puts the mathematical character of these processes into form as variables and constants. (DW, 1:420)

As a symbol, entropy thereby describes History’s “gently-sloping route of decline”, that will lead to a “spiritual crisis that will involve all Europe and America” and bring an end to the “tyranny of Reason” (DW, 1:424). Enlightenment has reached its apex and now enters free fall.⁸⁶

To some extent, Spengler’s account prefigures the critique formulated in Adorno and Horkheimer’s seminal *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947).⁸⁷ In fact, although it was mostly the right-wing literati who criticised the rationalisation of the world since

⁸⁴ Grim, *The Faust Legend in Literature and Music*, 2.67.

⁸⁵ Cited in Michael E. Zimmermann, *Heidegger’s Confrontation with Modernity* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 27.

⁸⁶ Spengler employs the image of an arch in this context. While the “*idea* of a culture [...] is the sum total of its inner possibilities” (DW, 1:104), its history is the “progressive actualizing of its possible” (DW, 1:105), rendering its height the full realisation of the latter and thereby also initiating its end. The image of rise and fall employed by Spengler is not only a commonplace in historiography but also integral to the Faust myth, especially in its romantic manifestations, which utilise the myth of Icarus, in which the course of self-realisation becomes identical with that of self-annihilation. Cf. Karl Eibl, *Das monumentale Ich: Wege zu Goethes ‘Faust’* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 2000), 276.

⁸⁷ See Theodor W. Adorno, “Spengler after the Decline,” in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), 51-72. Adorno and Horkheimer, as Martins argues, moved towards a “left-wing version of the Faustian view of technology”, although their work “lacked fundamental critical re-working of the Faustian tradition” (“Technology, modernity, politics”, 171).

the end of the nineteenth century, criticism of the unwholesome, disenchanting, and deadening effects of apostatised reason, mostly associated with science and urban life, could be found on the entirety of the political spectrum.⁸⁸ However, what makes Spengler's view unique amongst the manifold works concerned with decline and disenchantment, from Friedrich Schiller's "On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry" (1795), Jacob Burckhardt's *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1890), Johan Huizinga's *The Waning of The Middle Ages* (1924), Weber's work, or even the ninth of Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940), is his propagation of a negative form of *amor fati*. As the invasive dynamic of economic and industrial processes does not allow for alternative ideologies (DW, 1:410), humans impede their freedom of conscience and can only modulate within "narrow limits", which in Protestant terms would be the preordained station in life: "We have not the freedom to reach to this or that, but the freedom to do the necessary or nothing" (DW, 2:507). Only incident "erodes the edge of fate", in Pynchon's words "Murphy's Law, where salvation would be" (GR, 471).⁸⁹ There is, however no deliverance through chance or fate at the end of the Faustian age. As Gilbert Merlio observes:

Spengler saw, just as Nietzsche, a second religiosity emerging at the end of the cultural cycle: as the explanatory possibilities of physics and other sciences are exhausted, a desire for metaphysics emerges again, which, however, will only be met by idolatry, not true religion.⁹⁰

And as there is equally no political progress at the end of the cultural cycle, Faustian man has to bow before the power of history. Spengler's fatalism led many of his critics to accuse him of plain nihilism.⁹¹ Although these accusations may not stand uncontested, his emplotment of history and dismissal of civilization's ability to alter the completion of this 'inwardly necessary evolution' (DW, 1:424) conjure up a notion of fate that, just like religious 'paranoia', displaces any human agency and

⁸⁸ See Gilbert Merlio, "Die mythenlose Mythologie des Oswald Spengler", in *Moderne und Mythos*, ed. Silvio Vietta and Herbert Uerlings (München: Wilhelm Fink, 2006), 209.

⁸⁹ Inger Dalsgaard, "The Linking Feature: Degenerative Systems on Pynchon and Spengler", *Pynchon Notes* 44-45 (1999): 110. The element of chance, as Dalsgaard and others have noted, is presented in Pynchon's novels as one way out of the 'iron cage'.

⁹⁰ Merlio, "Die mythenlose Mythologie des Oswald Spengler", 218.

⁹¹ William Harlan Hale, for instance, held that "Spengler is not merely a determinist, a fatalist" but a "conscious and deliberate opponent of human principles" who "represents something ultimately Mephistophelian". William Harlan Hale, *Challenge to Defeat: Modern Man in Goethe's World and Spengler's Century* (New York: Hartcourt, Brace and Company, 1932), 159-60. While other critics, such as Weber, dismissed the work as dilettantism or even a Wagnerian prose-poem, *The Decline of the West* indeed features a comparison between entropic decline and the myth of Ragnarök (DW, 1:424).

obligations toward an imaginary higher power.⁹² Even more problematic is Spengler's methodology of presenting cultures as organisms and world-history as their collective biography (DW, 1:104). His idiosyncratic efforts to elaborate homologies of and analogies between disparate phenomena, for instance, may rank only second to that of Frazer's *The Golden Bough* or Graves's *The White Goddess*. A piece of parodic criticism by Robert Musil is revealing in this respect:

There are lemon-yellow butterflies, and there are lemon-yellow Chinese. In a certain sense, then, one can say that the butterfly is the winged, middle-European, dwarf Chinese. Butterflies and Chinese are both familiar as images of sexual desire. Here the thought is formulated for the first time of the previously unrecognized commonality between the great ages of lepidopteral fauna and Chinese culture. That butterflies have wings and the Chinese do not is only a superficial phenomenon.⁹³

Although Musil rightly attacks Spengler's epistemological relativism, his totalising world-view, and lack of scientific methodology (that resembles Pynchon's Herbert Stencil in that it reveals more about the historian's mindset than history itself), the vision provided by *The Decline of the West* was deemed fitting for the state of affairs at the beginning of the twentieth century. As Heidegger writes: "Spengler's proposition is only the negative, though correct, consequence of Nietzsche's word [sic], 'The wasteland grows'"⁹⁴

4. Appropriations and Transgressions

[W]hatever lived as German stands now as an
abomination and the epitome of evil.
—Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus*⁹⁵

While such re-interpretations of the myth may not fully acknowledge the complexity of Goethe's drama, his quester nevertheless became an allegory for the 'German soul'

⁹² See John Farrell, *Paranoia and Modernity: Cervantes to Rousseau* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 309-10.

⁹³ Robert Musil, "Mind and Experience: Notes for Readers Who Have Eluded the *Decline of the West*", in *Precision and Soul: Essays and Addresses*, ed. and trans. Burton Pike and David S. Luft (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 136.

⁹⁴ Cited in Zimmermann, *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity*, 26.

⁹⁵ Mann, *Doctor Faustus*, 506.

and then an apotheosis of the full catalogue of the nation's transgressions.⁹⁶ This was mainly possible via the revalorisation of the Romantics, for whom the soul-seller became "an eloquent rebel" and spokesman for iconoclasm, the breakdown of taboos, and self-redemption outside the bounds of religion, and in a second instance to nationalist appropriations of the myth that turned such sensibilities into a justification for national supremacy and, beyond that, limitless domination.⁹⁷

Berman, drawing from Lukács, points to a dialectical relationship between these impulses in arguing that *Faust* dramatizes larger tensions in modern European societies. The social division of labour produces a large class of relatively independent producers of culture and ideas. This climate fosters the emergence of artistic, scientific, legal, and philosophical specialists who create a dynamic modern culture. However, because this division keeps advancements and their potentials from the surrounding world, the latter find themselves within a stagnant society and are "torn between inner and outer life".⁹⁸ During the era of European Romanticism, this tendency had a special resonance in countries in which one's stagnant society was considered to lag behind those of other countries, which often resulted in inner tensions that were to be released in revolutionary settings. Describing such a culture, *Faust* also perceptively prefigures a situation in Germany in the late nineteenth century that saw, according to critic Thomas Moore, not only an increasing specialisation of knowledge and bureaucratization but also an increasing interest in *volk*-mysticism.⁹⁹ It was in this climate that Faust became the most popular image of the German intellectual and scientist and also a figure of national heroism, a titan whose doings determined the course of history. This 'heroic' image was then taken to extremes in twentieth-century German nationalist appropriations of Goethe's drama.¹⁰⁰ Fusing the de-demonized image of the soul-seller with equally distorted

⁹⁶ Goethe did not consider action as a way to salvation: "[a]bsolute activity, of whatever kind, ultimately leads to bankruptcy". Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Maxims and Reflections*, trans. Elizabeth Stopp (London: Penguin, 1998), 60. For Goethe the key to Faust's salvation was "in Faust himself an higher and ever purer activity continuing right to the end, and from on high the eternal Love coming to his aid. This is entirely in keeping with our religious conception, according to which we are not saved by our own strength alone but by supervenient divine grace". David Luke, "Introduction", *Faust: Part Two*, lxxi. This grace, as Lukács argues, is transformed in the figure of the Penitent "into its opposite by giving it a terrestrial and immanent character" (*Goethe and His Age*, 229).

⁹⁷ Lewin, "A Faustian Typology", 6.

⁹⁸ Berman, *All that Is Solid*, 43.

⁹⁹ Moore, *The Style of Connectedness*, 206.

¹⁰⁰ Some of the numerous nationalistic Faustiana are Obenauer's *Der faustische Mensch* (1922), Brunner's *Faustischer Geist* (1927), Korff's *Faustischer Glaube* (1938), and Kummer's *Anfang und*

versions of Fichte's idealism and Nietzsche's will to power, the latter presented Faust's march towards peril as the tragic greatness of the inevitably doomed, whose immodesty, lapses, and perpetrations were evils allegedly necessary for the achievement of progress and greater humanity. The national myth was thus fully turned into ideology, naturalising and depoliticising political aims by means of poetic authority and world-historical 'evidence'. Faust's marriage with Helena, for instance, was taken as a symbolic legitimisation of imperialism, his building project seen as the laudable creation of a new *Lebensraum*, and the removal of Philemon and Baucis as an indicator of an unconditioned will to power. In the knapsacks of German soldiers, *Faust* eventually made its way to the front. As Werner Sombart wrote: "Militarism is heroic spirit enhanced to martial spirit. [...] It is 'Faust' and 'Zarathustra' and Beethoven scores in the trenches".¹⁰¹

If Goethe was thus appropriated, then Spengler, as Herminio Martins argues, set forth "an image of technology and science, which became [...] virtually hegemonic in Germany during the Weimar Republic and in the Third Reich", while his overt racism, militant nationalism and destinarian view of history could easily be pressed into the latter's service.¹⁰² Overwhelmed by a world seemingly sinking into chaos, the Weimar Republic, as Siegfried Kracauer argues in his discussion of the 'doomed' atmosphere during the German nineteen-twenties, saw no other political alternative than tyranny or anarchic chaos.¹⁰³ While both options may have seemed equally dreadful and/or spectacular, the "malicious conservatism" (DF, 297) of the Spenglerians, to use Mann's phrase, in tendency agreed more with the authoritarian model. Spengler's prophecy of the fate of the West could therefore easily be restructured into a propagation of Caesarism and imperialistic 'renewal', by which the exhausted occident would gain vital injections while fending off the 'barbarism' threatening to invade from the East. As the narrator of Mann's *Doctor Faustus* holds: "what people mean by the breakthrough to world power to which destiny has called us is a breaking out into the world" (DF, 324). To cite just one example of this logic: three years before Hitler rose to power, to mention but one example, Heidegger, in

Ende des faustischen Jahrtausends (1934), and, most prominently, Alfred Rosenberg's *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* (1930) that radically revalorises the Faustian (read 'nordic') endeavour.

¹⁰¹ Werner Sombart, *Händler und Helden* (1925), cited in Heribert Münkler, *Die Deutschen und ihre Mythen* (Berlin, Rowohlt, 2009), 119 (my translation).

¹⁰² Martins, Herminio. "Technology, modernity, politics", 164.

¹⁰³ Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 88 (hereafter cited in text as CH).

many respects influenced by the philosopher of history, called for a “powerful leader who could restore the inner greatness of *Dasein* by renewing the mystery and terror of existence”.¹⁰⁴ That the terror which came to be predominant in the Third Reich was firmly based on technology and rational organisation has long become common knowledge, despite the neo-romantic and anti-rational image Nazism gave itself.¹⁰⁵ And if Horkheimer and Adorno’s 1947 work conceptualised such rationales, Mephistopheles already captures their gist:

The little earth-god still persists in his old ways,
Ridiculous as ever, as in his first days.
He’d have improved if you’d not given
Him a mere glimmer of the light of heaven:
He calls it Reason, and it only has increased
His power to be beastlier than a beast. (F, 281-86)

¹⁰⁴ See Zimmermann, *Heidegger’s Confrontation with Modernity*, 33. See also Martins, who argues: “It is to the non-scientific, even non-rational, modes of knowledge, relations to being, or forms of ontological disclosure that Faustian theorists appealed to overcome the predicaments of technological modernity—though often they embraced, rather than attempted to transcend, technological nihilism” (“Technology, modernity, politics”, 165).

¹⁰⁵ Two paradigmatic analyses locating the roots of Nazism in a neo-romantic reaction against modernity are George L. Mosse’s *The Crisis of German Ideology* (1964) and Ernst Bloch’s *Heritage of Our Times* (1935), while Zygmunt Bauman, in *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), examines the role of bureaucracy and technology.

Chapter 2: Faust in America

1. The Puritan Complex

Separating the Church and religion means forfeiting the ability to separate religion and madness
—Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus*¹⁰⁶

The American legacies of this myth, especially its twentieth-century transformations, “cannot be fully explained as a mere combination of European folk culture and Calvinistic teachings”, for its lines of transmission are too rhizomatic and complex.¹⁰⁷ Yet the unsurprisingly Puritan tenor of its early reception in the U.S. suggests that the motif of bargaining with the devil can be seen as an extension of the early Protestant ideological agenda. Faust was one of the “familiar figures inherited along with the English culture of the seventeenth century”,¹⁰⁸ but while the bogus scholar, as indicated, was relegated to the domain of light entertainment or erudite marginalia in England and continental Europe, in the New World he made frequent appearances in sermons and religious tracts. The English translation of the *Historia* was among the most popular publications in seventeenth-century New England,¹⁰⁹ and its ‘realistic’ style made it not only available for edifying purposes but also as a tool of religious propaganda. While Increase Mather, for instance, considered the historical Faust an “example of heresy and irresponsible lifestyle and with that a proof of the existence of the devil and witchcraft”,¹¹⁰ the first American Faust, authored by Increase’s grandson Thomas Walter, features not merely a lengthy discourse on predestination but uses the soul-seller as a means to demonize an adversary.¹¹¹ Cotton Mather’s ‘documentation’ of the Salem witch craze, although it makes no mention of the conjurer, is indicative of the political ends to which accounts of deals with the devil were used in the worst

¹⁰⁶ Mann, *Doctor Faustus*, 128.

¹⁰⁷ Waegner, “Der Teufel”, 63. De Huszar Allen rightly notes that “nowhere outside Germany has Faust appeared so frequently or in such variegated forms as in the United States” (*The Faust Legend*, 54). Faust is frequently featured in American literature (in Eugene O’Neill, Gertrude Stein, William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Karl Shapiro, Hart Crane, Norman Mailer, Philip K. Dick, or Jack Kerouac), he stars in musicals and movies, such as Randy Newman’s *Faust* (1993), *O Brother Where Art Thou* (Coen Brothers, 2000), or *Ghost Rider* (Mark Steven Johnson, 2007), and last but not least in paintings, such as Nabil Kanso’s or comics, be it in form of a “guest part” in *Captain America* or a full series, as in Tim Virgil’s *Faust: Love of the Damned* (adopted for the screen by Brian Yuzna in 2001).

¹⁰⁸ Dabezies, André. “The First American Faust (1720)”, *Comparative Literature Studies* 8, no. 4 (1971): 303.

¹⁰⁹ Invoices of Boston bookseller show that it outsold all books other than the bible, hymnals, and a few school textbooks (cf. Durrani, *Faust*, 351).

¹¹⁰ Waegner, “Der Teufel”, 61.

¹¹¹ Dabezies, “The First American Faust (1720)”, 303-4, 306.

case. As a section of his *The Wonders of the Invisible World* (1693), based on narratives from the witch trials, reads:

The *New-Englanders* are a People of God settled in those, which were once the *Devil's* Territories; and it may easily be supposed that the *Devil* was exceedingly disturbed, when he perceived such a People here accomplishing the Promise of old [...] We have been advised by some Credible Christians yet alive, that a Malefactor, accused of *Witchcraft* as well as *Murder*, and Executed in this place more than Forty Years ago, did then give Notice of, *An Horrible PLOT against the Country by WITCHCRAFT, and a Foundation of WITCHCRAFT then laid, which if it were not seasonably discovered would probably Blow up, and pull down all the Churches in the Country.*¹¹²

However, if the figure of the magus did not merely reflect what the prevailing hegemony deemed damnable but also served to expose the latter's dogmata and paradoxes, this holds especially true in the Puritan case. Faust's excesses appear to stand in stark opposition to Protestant virtues, yet there are intersections that far exceed the personal characteristics shared between Luther and the magician-scholar (both turning from the prevailing religious paradigm, both being academics, both negotiating, although in different ways, with the devil). Faust's adversaries were not at all against the radical individualism he represents,¹¹³ neither did they refrain from advancing science and the acquisition of knowledge as such.¹¹⁴ As Daniel Bell argues, Goethe's Faust is a modern figure because he strives without relation to the past, with the result of repeating mistakes.¹¹⁵ I hold that if American civilization, separating itself from its European origins, undertook a similar manoeuvre, the emergent American literary tradition of Faust texts can be understood as part of a critique of such discontinuity. With the rigorous rule of the founding fathers and the witch trials still in memory, authors writing after the revolution began to reassess the popular fantasies of new beginnings, a second Eden or New Jerusalem. The English Romantics had already shown how to use the myth in order to criticise fantasies of

¹¹² Cited in Durrani, *Faust*, 351.

¹¹³ As George Bernhard Shaw pithily pointed out: "Four hundred years ago, when belief in God and in revelation was general throughout Europe, a [...] wave of thought led the strongest-hearted people to affirm that every man's private judgment was a more trustworthy interpreter of God and revelation than the Church. This was called Protestantism". George Bernhard Shaw, "The Perfect Wagnerite", in *Major Critical Essays* (London: Constable, 1932), 214.

¹¹⁴ Several critics argue that Puritanism partly served as a catalyst in the development of modern science. For a detailed treatment see Peter Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Natural Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹¹⁵ Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 161.

power and the obsessive pursuit of absolutes, from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) to Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) to James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), which attacks Scottish Calvinism and Antinomian predestinationism in particular. American authors employed the same principles and appropriated the myth of the knowledge seeker, turning it against the all too worldly interests of the Saints.

One of the first American literary examples, Washington Irving's "The Devil and Tom Walker" (1824), addresses this issue by indicting the excessive materialism of Irvin's contemporaries by means of the myth. Set in 1721, this tale narrates the rise and fall of a miser who makes a career with the aid of "Old Scratch", to the peril of the former's soul. Early in the story Tom loses his way in a forest near Boston and there meets the devil, who shows him a considerable number of trees marked with the names of successful men, the 'who's who' of the colony being at the same time a catalogue of the souls in his possession. Cloaking his story in a folkloristic-historic ambience, Irvin implies that the social imbalances and exploitative capitalism among his contemporaries stem from colonial times.¹¹⁶ Similarly, Hawthorne uses the Faustian metaphor as an ethical framework with which he interprets the "situation of the New Adam in the New World" as a series of missed chances and wrongdoings in the name of "good".¹¹⁷ While in *The Scarlet Letter* Hester Prynne's status as a punished transgressor enables the author to cast an 'outsider' perspective onto the sanctimony of the Saints, their recklessness, and lust for domination, the protagonist of "Young Goodman Brown" (1835) directly learns from the devil:

I have been as well acquainted with your family as with ever a one among the Puritans; and that's no trifle to say. I helped your grandfather, the constable, when he lashed the Quaker woman so smartly through the streets of Salem; and it was I that brought your father a pitch-pine knot, kindled at my own hearth, to set fire to an Indian village, in King Philip's war. They were my good friends, both.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Many American stories about deals with the devil have a decidedly economic focus in depicting the bargain as either business contracts or bets with high financial stakes (Waegner, "Der Teufel", 64). If one accepts the suggestion that the Puritan covenant developed into what was termed American Dream by James Truslow Adams, it is unsurprising that many authors had Mephistophelian characters exploit this principle, from Roger Chillingworth in Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* and Professor Westervelt in *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) or the tricksters in Melville's *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857), to Meyer Wolfsheim in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) or Flem Snopes in William Faulkner's *The Hamlet* (1940), not to mention Gaddis and Pynchon's tricksters and devilish systems.

¹¹⁷ Waegner, "Der Teufel", 63.

¹¹⁸ Cited in Durrani, *Faust*, 353.

It is also Hawthorne, who, according to Leslie Fiedler, is the first American author to identify the Puritan experience as a Faustian pact.¹¹⁹ When Brown writes, drawing from E. M. Butler, that “[t]he Lutheran notion of inescapable damnation takes over the Faust legend and makes it a profound symbol of modern man”,¹²⁰ he describes the same power of blackness Melville identified in Hawthorne’s writings, a power that

derives its force from its appeal to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free.¹²¹

Faced with a world in which all that purports to be in the service of good secretly serves the adversary, a world where Christ ultimately might as well be the devil, then, “then only Faustian doubt can deliver us from the ultimate con game, the trap of religious belief”, as Fiedler notes in his discussion of Melville’s *The Confidence Man* (1857).¹²² This is certainly one reason why Hawthorne and Melville embarked on challenging orthodox claims by capitalising on wickedness and hell-fire, as epitomised in the secret motto of *Moby Dick* (1851), as well as on the devil’s talent for inducing doubt and ambiguity in seemingly self-evident and indisputable matters.

2. Faustus Returns: Modern American Faustiana

No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb.

—Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*¹²³

After its initial reception in the 1600s, interest in Faust was renewed when Faust farces and puppet plays regained the stage and Gothic romances, such as Beckford’s *Vathek* (1786) and Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer*, became popular. As Cathy

¹¹⁹ See Fiedler, *Love and Death*, 419. The Faustian backdrop in Hawthorne comes most explicitly to the fore in *The Scarlet Letter*, where Reverend Dimmesdale perceives of his choice to follow his temptation “by a dream of happiness” (i.e. his desire for Hester) as a devilish bargain, and where the revenging Chillingworth appears, like Goethe’s Mephistopheles, as an “emissary of the devil, who plots against Dimmesdale’s soul with “Divine permission”. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, ed. Brian Harding (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 222, 128.

¹²⁰ Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1970), 214 (hereafter cited in text as *LD*).

¹²¹ Cited in Fiedler, *Love and Death*, 415.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 437.

¹²³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Routledge, 1990), 320.

Waegner observes, together “with a growing adaptation of the Faustian archetype in the first half of the nineteenth century went the reception of Goethe’s Faust I” that led to the so-called Faust Renaissance in the 1830s and 40s.¹²⁴ Edward Everett and George Ticknor of Harvard University gave lectures on the play and published criticism in the *North American Review*, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow worked extensively on Goethe. What is most remarkable, however, is the sheer wealth of translations and English adaptations.¹²⁵ The popularity of the myth then intensified again by the middle of the twentieth century. Some of Schubert’s lieder were based on poems from the drama, several operas such as Berlioz’s *La Damnation de Faust*, Gounod’s *Faust*, and Boito’s *Mefistofele* became rapidly popular. A production of Gounod’s version was given at the opening of New York’s Metropolitan Opera in 1883, and had such a long run that “New Yorkers started referring to their new theater as the Faustspielhaus”.¹²⁶

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the events in Germany between 1933 and 1945 lead to a transformation of the image of Faust so profound that, according to Pynchon critic David Cowart, Nazism came to replace the metaphysical evil of the religious tradition.¹²⁷ Accordingly, after Faust had been put on trial in Mann’s 1947 novel, the interest in the myth of the soul-seller seemed to be waning. “Since 1960, we seem to have moved on to some extent from the concept of the great global crisis, and perhaps feel less need for symbolic figures representing Man wrestling with his demons”, André Dabezies wrote at the end of a century that must have surely wished to leave its struggles behind.¹²⁸ However, this statement neither fully acknowledges the transformations of the Faust myth in the 1960s nor its re-emergence in America that dissociated Faust from Romantic tropes and national stereotypes. Hiroshima and Nagasaki had made clear that mankind’s bargaining with the devil was not restricted to Fascist Europe. Moreover, there was also an increasing awareness that Germany’s fatal convergence of technological expertise and irrationalism were to be found in other settings as well. Thus, a range of thinkers, from Karl Schapiro to Brown, was

¹²⁴ Waegner, “Der Teufel”, 63.

¹²⁵ W. Heinemann’s 1886 bibliographical collection of English and American Faustiana already contained over 160 entries. W. Heinemann, *Goethes Faust in England und Amerika: Bibliographische Zusammenstellung* (Berlin: August Hettler, 1886).

¹²⁶ Gino Sergè, *Faust in Copenhagen: A Struggle for the Soul of Physics* (London: Penguin, 2008), 49.

¹²⁷ David Cowart, *Thomas Pynchon and the Dark Passages of History* (Athens/ London: The University of Georgia Press, 2011), 59.

¹²⁸ André Dabezies, “Faust”, in *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes*, ed. Pierre Brunel, trans. Wendy Allatson, Judith Hayward, and Trista Selous (London: Routledge, 1992), 438.

reluctant to let Germany carry “all the sins of the Western world” (LD, 15).¹²⁹

Since the myth describes a “revolt against human limitations”,¹³⁰ it is easy to conceive of the well-attested hostility of American culture against “the idea of limit” as Faustian.¹³¹ Yet if aspects reflected in early Faustian texts “vary with the relative status accorded to man and his intellect, compared with the value placed on obedience to the prevailing hegemony, whether of church or state”, twentieth-century American Faustiana betray a striking consistency as regards the latter, partly because of the increasing reception of *Faust II* that lent itself to socio-economic readings and made the myth available as a yardstick for American conditions.¹³² The basic proposition of the drama is retained, and so is the new image of Faust as a representative of a prevailing hegemony pursuing supremacy at unjustifiable costs. Max Lerner, for instance, in *America as a Civilization: Life and Thought in the United States Today* (1957), saw Americans as a mixture between Tamerlane and Faust, while Brown, in *Life Against Death*, measured the devilish qualities of the Protestant ethic by means of the myth. While Goethe, Hawthorne, and Melville play a crucial part in such reassessments, their most influential source was certainly, although paradoxically, Spengler.¹³³ The “systemic nature” of the latter’s portrait of Western Faustianism was deemed suitable as a description of the United States, since these, according to Weber, “represented the ‘highest development’ of the decline of the West into the controlled frenzy of producing wealth as an end in itself”.¹³⁴ This was most appealing to those who “found evidence throughout the affluent society of a grand design in

¹²⁹ Schapiro was one of the first authors to point to the transatlantic migration of the hubristic scholar type in his poem “The Progress of Faust”, published in the same year as Mann’s *Doktor Faustus*: “Backwardly tolerant, Faustus was expelled/ From the Third Reich in Nineteen Thirty-nine./ [...] Five years unknown to enemy and friend/ He hid, appearing on the sixth to pose/ In an American desert at war’s end/ Where, at his back, a dome of atoms rose”. Karl Schapiro, *The New Yorker* (May 11, 1946), 28. For a treatment of Faustian scientists in literature see Kirsten Shepherd-Barr, *Science on Stage: From Doctor Faustus to Copenhagen* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

¹³⁰ Palmer and More, *The Sources of the Faust Tradition*, 3.

¹³¹ Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (London: Penguin, 2004), 185.

¹³² Haynes, *From Faust to Strangelove*, 19.

¹³³ A second strand of thought influential in this respect can be found in the philosophy and personality of Friedrich Nietzsche, which had been crucial for *The Decline of the West* and later Mann’s *Doctor Faustus* but also independently gained access to American Faustiana, such as Eugene O’Neill’s *The Great God Brown* (1926), which dramatizes a disruptive antagonism between Dionysian creativity and Apollonian (read protestant ascetic) abnegation within its protagonist, the failing artist Dion Anthony. The themes addressed in O’Neill prefigure many of Gaddis and Pynchon’s preoccupations, such as the possibilities of art and life in an environment obsessed with materialism and mechanisation, the predominance of religious figures and texts (Thomas à Kempis’s *Imitation of Christ*), and the Nietzschean dichotomy of Dionysian and Apollonian life. An astonishingly early description of the ascending Apollonian order in the US, the play describes not only how American bourgeois capitalism forces artistic talent into commoditisation but also how it suppresses a dignified, fulfilling life.

¹³⁴ Zimmermann, *Heidegger’s Confrontation with Modernity*, 178.

which science and technology were combining to dominate, decode and finally copy the natural world itself'.¹³⁵ Thus, Spengler's suggestions found correlatives in various works written in the 1960s and 70s, from Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) to Andrew Hacker's *The End of the American Era* (1970), who share with the philosopher the suspicion that Western history may not be progressive but rather a "falling away from innocence into routine, mechanization and chaos".¹³⁶ Spenglerian thought is also strongly present in American fiction from the 1920s onwards, from John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) and Henry Miller's *The Tropic of Capricorn* (1934) to Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962).¹³⁷ As John Lardas has shown in his treatment of the religious vision of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs, Spengler was no less influential for the Beat Generation.¹³⁸ The most explicit use of the Faust myth amongst the Beats can be found in Jack Kerouac, who fused his perusal of the German philosopher of history with that of Goethe in *Doctor Sax: Faust Part Three* (1959), an autobiographic coming of age novel, written, as James T. Jones notes, "to represent the state of the soul in the twentieth century, specifically in 'America the final home of Faust'".¹³⁹ Kerouac's romanticised image of Fellahin culture, however, and his concluding suggestion that the "universe disposes of its own evil", is far more optimistic than Gaddis's or Pynchon's, who were in fact familiar with Spengler's apocalyptic narrative.¹⁴⁰ Gaddis had read *The Decline of the West* at the age of twenty and was overwhelmed by the latter's worldview.¹⁴¹ Such visions of doom also appealed to Pynchon,¹⁴² not only to his

¹³⁵ Dalsgaard, "The Linking Feature", 99.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 105; cf. Zimmermann, *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity*, 179.

¹³⁷ Brown's work will be discussed in more detail the context of Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. Among the British works influenced or at least contiguous to Spengler's critique of modernity are D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* (1915) and *Women in Love* (1921) and Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* (1947).

¹³⁸ John Lardas, *The Bop Apocalypse: The Religious Visions of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

¹³⁹ Cited in James T. Jones, *Jack Kerouac's Duluoz Legend: The Mythic Form of an Autobiographical Fiction* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 42. Although its influence on Pynchon cannot be fully traced, *Doctor Sax* appears to be a crucial text as regards *Gravity's Rainbow*. Both texts play with Spenglerian apocalyptic fantasies, include references to high and 'low' culture, incorporate dramatic form and songs into prose, and emphasise dreams and alternative conceptions of reality.

¹⁴⁰ Jack Kerouac, *Doctor Sax: Faust Part Three* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), 245. *Doctor Sax* is less informed by romantic primitivism than *On the Road* (1957), which presents, influenced by Spengler, Mexico as a 'Fellahin' culture. Cf. Robert Holton, "Kerouac among the Fellahin: On the Road to the Postmodern", *Modern Fiction Studies* 41, no. 2 (1995): 270.

¹⁴¹ The prevalence of Huizinga's narration of decline in *The Recognitions*, and even more so the presence of Norbert Wiener's *The Human Use of Human Beings* (1950) and Josiah Willard Gibbs's work in *J R*, tends to obscure the Spenglerian tenor in Gaddis's early work. Asked about where his pessimism stems from, Gaddis stated in an interview with *Der Spiegel* in 1996 that "[i]t was there from

juvenile fascination with “any idea of mass destruction or decline” but also his concerns with Puritan sensibilities.¹⁴³ As Spengler writes:

The Predestination doctrine of Calvin and Pascal—who [...] dared to draw the causal conclusion from Augustinian dialectic—is the *necessary* absurdity to which the pursuit of these secrets by reason leads. They lost the destiny-logic of the world-becoming and found themselves in the causal logic of notion and law; they left the realm of direct intuitive vision for that of a mechanical system of objects. [...] in this wise the Destiny idea—in the language of religion, God’s Providence—[...] is made to appear as a nature-force that is bound by irrevocable law and to turn the religious world-picture into a rigid and gloomy system of machinery. And yet was it not a Destiny again [...] that the English Puritans, who were filled with this conviction, were ruined not through any passive self-surrender but through their hearty and vigorous certainty that their will was the will of God? (DW, 1:141)

3. Max Weber, Eric Voegelin, and the Underbelly of Puritanism

As argued, and yet to be demonstrated, especially the Faustiana of Gaddis and Pynchon draw from a legacy of the myth that by no means argues from a Protestant point of view but turns the table in the dialectic of demonization by questioning the relations between Puritan theology, materialism, and politics. As regards this characteristic, connections to Goethe, Spengler, and Mann cannot be overlooked. Yet there are also strong currents of socio-political thought in the work of both authors that critically negotiate those ‘civil theologies’ that acquired dominant status in the U.S. Specifically the works of Max Weber and the political philosopher Eric Voegelin

the beginning. When I was 20 I read Spengler’s vision of decline and was overwhelmed. In my four novels hope continuously declines. America today? I am deeply convinced that it will not end well” (my translation). “Eine verlorene Schlacht”, *Der Spiegel* 41 (1996), 269.

¹⁴² Like in the case of Gaddis, the presence of Norbert Wiener and Henry Adams in Pynchon’s work partly obscures that of Spengler, who even makes a brief appearance as a character in *Against the Day*: Thomas Pynchon, *Against the Day* (London: Penguin, 2006), 412. In his introduction to *Slow Learner*, Pynchon points to the early influence of Wiener’s *The Human Use of Human Beings* and Adam’s *The Education of Henry Adams*, both works which are concerned with visions of catastrophe and decline—“Adam’s sense of power out of control coupled with Wiener’s spectacle of universal heat-death and mathematical stillness seemed the ticket”. Thomas Pynchon, “Introduction”, in *Slow Learner: Early Stories* (London, Vintage: 2007), 13. Spengler, however, does not merely provide a contiguous coupling of such sensibilities but is palpably present in *Gravity’s Rainbow* as Inger Dalsgaard argues.

¹⁴³ Pynchon, “Introduction”, *Slow Learner*, 13. As Lardas notes, *The Decline of the West* lent itself considerably to the reactivation of apocalyptic thinking and Manifest Destiny in the U.S. (*The Bop Apocalypse*, 48). Dalsgaard points in this context to analogies between Spengler’s notion that humans are destined to contribute to larger suicidal structures and the Puritan belief in fallen nature (“The Linking Feature”, 105); cf. Molly Hite’s assertion that in Pynchon’s ‘providential’ history of entropic decline the elect and the preterite are equally doomed: *Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1983), 106.

are crucial in this context, not only because they treat the American model as symptomatic of Western civilization but also, as I content, because they need to be read as complementary to the Faustian narrative derived from Goethe and Spengler. In the following I will therefore briefly (and anachronistically) discuss the socio-economic dimension of Puritanism, that is, firstly its political agenda as formulated by Voegelin, and secondly its “*economy of individual salvation*” that developed into the spirit of capitalism, as famously described by Weber.¹⁴⁴

Following Weber, and less explicitly Spengler, Voegelin presented the history of modernity as a “history of collapse”.¹⁴⁵ He considers the essence of modernity as a progressive institutionalisation of ‘political’ or ‘inner-worldly’ religions, which he later termed ‘Gnostic’, that is, religious groups that do not find their “*realissimum* in the ground of the world” but discover the divine in “partial contents of the world”.¹⁴⁶ This shift, as he argues, was caused by the self-destruction of medieval philosophy and the Church’s loss of its claim on spiritual leadership to spiritually retrogressive (later secularised) ‘sects’. Through the latter’s “immanentisation of the eschaton”, that is, the interpretation of the symbols of Christian civilization as experiences to be realised *within* the world, the State becomes the truly ‘real’ that endows humans with a sense of life that is part of a supra-human reality, a community of the ‘people of God’. Since intramundane salvation was the prime objective of Voegelin’s Gnostics, they most efficiently “released human forces for the building of a civilization”,¹⁴⁷ a process he describes in his introduction to *The Political Religions* as “religiously evil, Satanic”.¹⁴⁸ Such ‘Satanism’, he argued, could not only be found in the rationales of Joachim de Flora or milleniaristic groups such as the Münster Anabaptists but most explicitly among English Puritans.

¹⁴⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Sage, 1993), 145.

¹⁴⁵ Dietmar Herz, “The concept of ‘political religions’ in the thought of Eric Voegelin”, in *Totalitarianism and Political Religions*, vol. 1, *Concepts for the Comparison of Dictatorships*, ed. Hans Mayer, trans. Jodi Bruhn (New York: Routledge, 2004), 152.

¹⁴⁶ Cited *ibid.*, 151. Voegelin’s concept of Gnosticism is not related to that of antiquity but to the “fallacious construction of history” as an immanentisation of the Christian eschaton “which characterizes modernity” since Joachim of Flora. Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952) 126, cf. 124. As regards his terminological and the association of Gnostic sects with emergent modernity, Voegelin is indebted to *The Decline of the West*. Spengler writes: “On the very threshold of the Western Culture we meet the great Joachim of Floris (c.1145-1202), the first thinker of the Hegelian stamp who shattered the dualistic world-form of Augustine [...]. Ibsen treats it [Joachim’s teaching] with thoroughness in his *Emperor and Galilean* (1837), in which he presents the Gnostic world-conception through the figure of the wizard Maximus” (DW, 1:19-20).

¹⁴⁷ Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 130.

¹⁴⁸ Cited in Herz, “The concept of ‘political religions’”, 153.

If it has become a commonplace to hold that the offspring of Protestantism helped to shape the subjective consciousness necessary for modernity as regards economics and empirical sciences, Voegelin argued that Hooker, Winthrop and their contemporaries also helped to shape what Milan Zafirovski calls the spirit of authoritarianism, a “practice of total or absolute mastery of the social and natural world” that ultimately became “authoritarian rule or domination”.¹⁴⁹ In *The New Science of Politics*, Voegelin describes the establishment of the denomination as a crude political manoeuvre of that sort: in order to challenge the old government, Puritans demonized it while presenting themselves as good. If the old government is of the devil, then social evils cannot be reformed and defects of the government cannot be repaired, which leaves no other option than revolution.¹⁵⁰ In order to represent themselves as a redemptive institution, however, the Puritans depended on the authority of the Bible. Where the Scripture deviated from their image, it had to be made compatible. This appropriation necessitated a Gnostic step of positing that only those inspired by the Holy Ghost are able to understand it properly, which in turn resulted in a division between the elect and the ignorant rest.¹⁵¹ The propagandistic message entailed in such a division, a characteristic shared by Gnostic religions, is of immense appeal, as Giovanni Filoramo summarises:

disengage yourself from the mass doomed to perdition; disengage yourself from those groups, the psychics, who claim to regulate the salvation of the masses; become one of us, join the club of elect souls predestined to salvation.¹⁵²

With increasing secularisation, as Voegelin argues, the theocratic structures and polarities of the community of “God’s people” remained while the contents changed from a universal kingdom with God as the peak of the hierarchy into the direction prefigured by the *Leviathan*, setting the “‘command of God’ [...] synonymous with inner-worldly formulas such as ‘command of history’, ‘historical destiny’, ‘command of blood’”.¹⁵³ As the latter terms indicate, Voegelin perceived “the totalitarianism of

¹⁴⁹ Milan Zafirovski, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Authoritarianism: Puritanism, Democracy, and Society* (New York: Springer), 27, 165.

¹⁵⁰ Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 150.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹⁵² Giovanni Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. Anthony Alcock (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 129.

¹⁵³ Cited in Herz, “The concept of ‘political religions’”, 152.

our time”, Fascism and Communism, as the endpoints of the Puritan “search for a civil theology”,¹⁵⁴ and despite his apodictic diction, his and more tenable analyses (by Shmuel Eisenstadt, Michael Walzer, or Zafirovski) have identified enough parallels to argue that the (secularised) manifestations of Puritanism can indeed be read as correlates of Goethe’s builder and the Caesarism of Spengler’s Faustian civilization.¹⁵⁵ Hence, the intellectual groundwork is ready to hand for Gaddis, who identifies the all-too saintly Saints as demiurgic spirits in his mock-Gnostic appropriation of theological romances, and for Pynchon, who equates Puritanism with totalitarianism.¹⁵⁶

If Puritanism was outwardly authoritarian, it was no less so in terms of its internal politics, that is, its distinction between elect and reprobate. As Zafirovski argues, it is eventually the Puritan covenant in its interpretation by the elect that enabled the ‘Saint’ to perform the total mastery of the social world.¹⁵⁷ If according to the Lutheran doctrine of election there are no means whatsoever of “attaining the grace of god for those to whom God had decided to deny it”, then individuals were expected to submit fully to the ‘preordained’ status quo.¹⁵⁸ The “individual should remain once and for all in the station and calling in which God had placed him, and should restrain his worldly activity within the limits imposed by his established station in life”.¹⁵⁹ John Winthrop’s sermon “A Model of Christian Charity”, delivered on board the *Arabella* on 8 April 1630, implemented this social schism as one creed of the American arch-pact. Yet again, with increasing secularisation there emerged a discrepancy between

¹⁵⁴ Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*, 163.

¹⁵⁵ Zafirovski, for instance, argues that Puritanism indeed “resembles, corresponds, or leads to fascism” (*The Protestant Ethic*, 230, cf. 225).

¹⁵⁶ It is astonishing how much in accord with Voegelin Gaddis suggests in *A Frolic of His Own*: “it’s what drove Dostoevski’s heroes over the brink, wasn’t it? this panic at living in a meaningless universe? Take the deep bedrock madness of the Germans from Peter the Hermit to Thomas Münster [sic] right down to the death camps they try to masquerade as nationalism.” William Gaddis, *A Frolic of His Own* (New York: Scribener, 1995), 328-29. Similar suggestions can be found in Pynchon *en masse*, for instance in the fictional Scurvhomite “sect of most pure Puritans” in the *Crying of Lot 49*, whose predestinarian views turn the universe into an “intricate machine” and its prime mover into a “blind, automatic anti-God”. Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (London: Picador, 1979), 107, 114. Similarly, *Gravity’s Rainbow* constantly equates Puritanism with totalitarianism. Moore, for instance, remarks in this context, that if Puritanism sometimes conceived of the American openness as a setting in which prophecies of the Revelation were to be fulfilled and in which the elect would escape from a declining Europe to build a city on a hill that would “shine forth over a darkening world”, then Pynchon makes his *Raketenstadt*, the technocratic and bureaucratized nightmare, “available as a parodic fulfillment” of such visions (*The Style of Connectedness*, 52). See also my chapters 5 and 7.

¹⁵⁷ Milan Zafirovski, “Protestantism and Authoritarianism: Weber’s Secondary Problem”, *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 40, no. 2 (2010): 166.

¹⁵⁸ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Routledge, 2007), 61.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 44; cf. Westminster Confession, Chapter III, No.3.

the theological basis of the binary distinction and its actual socio-economic grounds.

Especially in the latter respect, as Weber indicated, Puritanism betrayed a set of paradoxes no less dubious than those of Faust. When (Marlowe's) Faust "renounces theology for the literary", as Graham Hamill argues, he renounces the logic of the divine "gift and replaces it with the logic of endless exchange", in which the soul becomes negotiable.¹⁶⁰ In some sense this mirrors the Protestant emphasis on scripture that peaked in the authoritarian spirit of puritan "bibliocracies" in New England.¹⁶¹ Yet, there are more parallels. In his classic, although partly discredited *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber gives an account of the religious roots of modern occidental materialism. "The impulse of acquisition, pursuit of gain, of money" that encouraged the uniquely Western technical "utilization of scientific knowledge" and "rational capitalistic organization of free labour",¹⁶² according to Weber, has nothing to do with capitalism per se but springs from Protestant religions, in which the idea of "good works" turned into an obligation to work as a sign of God's grace. In Puritanism, to briefly present Weber's hypothesis, every individual is predestined to either salvation or damnation. Although good works cannot merit salvation, their accumulation is a "technical means [...] of getting rid of the fear of damnation".¹⁶³ Over the course of time the nature of good works assumed a purely economic character that became eventually identified with life itself: time is money, and the more the better. As Weber argued, at the turn of the twentieth century the spirit of religious asceticism had long vanished, but "capitalism, since it rests on mechanical foundations, needs its support no longer", and material goods, what were once good works, "have gained an increasing and finally inexorable power over the lives of men".¹⁶⁴ Brown summarises this in his psycho-historical reading, which resurfaces in *Gravity's Rainbow*, as follows:

Luther sees the final coming to power in this world of Satan in the coming to power of capitalism. The structure of the entire kingdom of Satan is essentially capitalistic: we are the Devil's property. [...] From the standpoint of original Protestant theology, the deification of capitalism and of the calling is the deification of the Devil, or at least an utter confusion

¹⁶⁰ Graham Hamill, "Faustus's Fortunes: Commodification, Exchange, and the Form of Literary Subjectivity" *ELH* 63, no. 2 (1996): 330, 310.

¹⁶¹ Zafirovski, *The Protestant Ethic*, 122; see also Sprunger, who argues that the sole authority of Anglo-American Puritans was based on Scripture (cited *ibid.*).

¹⁶² Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, xxxi, xxxvii.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 69, cf. 124.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 124.

between God and the Devil. From the psychoanalytical point of view, if the Devil is Death, and if capitalism is the Devil, then modern Protestantism's alliance with capitalism means its complete surrender to the death instinct. (LD, 221, 224)

The American Faust myth also reflects a second aspect Weber identified in the secularised Protestant ethic. Weber thought he had discovered “not only an element contributing to the development of a unique spirit of modern capitalism but also a spiritual discipline of enormous consequence that transformed and fortified the natural self of the Puritan believer into a hardened tool of divine purpose”.¹⁶⁵ While the illusion that accumulation could eventually vouchsafe salvation gradually diminished, the covenant also effectuated substantial social changes. The Puritans' initial view of the New World, as David Mogen holds, was of a “wilderness where they would be severely tried, a land of darkness threatening to extinguish the precarious light of Christianity”.¹⁶⁶ Walzer notes that the covenant gave the Saints “a sense of vocation and discipline which would free them” not only from perceived sinfulness but also from “the fear of disorder”.¹⁶⁷ Since they “lived always on the very brink of chaos”, they “maintained their position only through a constant vigilance and, indeed, a constant warfare against their own natural inclinations”,¹⁶⁸ which fostered a spirit, a “psychotechnology” of systematic self-control, as it were,¹⁶⁹ while institutionalising “suspicion and mutual surveillance” as a form of social compact.¹⁷⁰ The canon of Protestant virtues enabling such self-control (or self-repression, as Brown would have it) is amalgamated in Weber's formula of worldly asceticism that stands at the cradle of modern economy. The journey's end of this process is life in a ‘Shell as Hard as Steel’ (or “Iron Cage”, as Talcott Parsons mistranslates), and the “mechanized petrification” of pure utilitarianism, of specialists without spirit “trapped in a socioeconomic structure of their own making”.¹⁷¹ Whereas Faust willingly

¹⁶⁵ Harvey Goldman, *Politics, Death, and the Devil: Self and Power Max Weber and Thomas Mann* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 14.

¹⁶⁶ David Mogen, “Wilderness, Metamorphosis, and Millenium: Gothic Apocalypse From the Puritans to the Cyberpunks”, in *Frontier Gothic: Terror and Wonder at the Frontier in American Literature*, ed. David Mogen *et al.* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1993), 94.

¹⁶⁷ Michael Walzer, “Puritanism as a Revolutionary Ideology”, *History and Theory* 3, no. 1 (1963): 66.

¹⁶⁸ Walzer, “Puritanism as a Revolutionary Ideology”, 79.

¹⁶⁹ Heidegger argued that Christian thinking paved the way for a modern ‘psychotechnology’ (Zimmermann, *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity*, 180).

¹⁷⁰ Walzer, “Puritanism as a Revolutionary Ideology”, 79.

¹⁷¹ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 123, 124; see Peter Baehr, “The ‘Iron Cage’ and the ‘Shell as Hard as Steel’: Parsons, Weber, and the Stahlhartes Gehäuse Metaphor in the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism”, *History and Theory* 40, no. 2 (2001): 153. As Goldman points out, Weber's conception of

renounces his spiritual integrity for the sake of (partly) imaginary powers, however, the descendants of the Saints are bereft of such choice. Weber writes:

The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate world morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which to-day determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism.¹⁷²

As I will argue in the following, Gaddis's and Pynchon's protagonists can be read as a *reductio ad absurdum* of these principles. Both Wyatt and Slothrop are born into an iron cage, an economic and industrial order as immobilising as the Puritan doctrines with which they are infused. Both follow a peculiar 'calling', in which they subject themselves to the coordinates laid out by their Puritan origins.¹⁷³ In submitting themselves to soteriological quests (in Wyatt's case to redeem art, in Slothrop's to redeem the accumulated guilt of his ancestors), they perpetuate the very values and principles prescribed by the religious indoctrination they so eagerly want to abandon, while being unable to come out of their "own vain shell" (TR, 690). Gaddis and Pynchon present one of the pitfalls of Puritan self-discipline here, the Icarus-flight of selves drawing strength from a pact with an imaginary force that allows them to pursue their visions of transcending limitations. This pursuit, however, engenders nothing but isolation and alienation. *The Recognitions* and *Gravity's Rainbow* therefore negotiate to a remarkable degree an observation addressed in Mann's *Magic Mountain* and *Doctor Faustus*. As Mann summarised the gist of the two novels in his essay "My Times":

there is a real question whether man, for the sake of his intellectual and metaphysical security, would not rather have terror than freedom.¹⁷⁴

self in this context "is not of a self shaped by interaction or socialization; it is, rather, a countersocialized self, shaped to resist the effects of relationships and social norms" (*Politics, Death, and the Devil*, 9).

¹⁷² Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 123.

¹⁷³ According to Weber, in Puritanism, the true source of personality is "submission or devotion to the work or object as an ultimate value, coupled with systematic, rational effort in the calling to realize these values in the world" (Goldman, *Politics, Death, and the Devil*, 73).

¹⁷⁴ Mann, "My Times", 200; see Goldmann, *Politics, Death, and the Devil*, 235. For a discussion of Wyatt's inability to leave framework see Petrus van Ewijk, "Life must be led in the dark: Hans Vaihinger's *The Philosophy of "As If"* in William Gaddis's *The Recognitions*", *Orbis Litterarum* 65,

Such an agenda is discernible in both characters' quests: the inability to live in the open, the preference to inhabit a closed system of religion or paranoia (the difference between which is not essential in both works), deeming themselves damned, suffering from the dualism inscribed by the doctrine of unconditional election, yet perpetuating it to the point of breakdown. The epigraph of the first part of *The Recognitions*—"Es wird ein Mensch gemacht" (TR, 3)—already hints at such life in a closed circuit by referring to the homunculus in Goethe's *Faust*, a product of cold science, a pure spirit unable (but longing) to exist outside the *vas hermetica*. The same holds for the multitude of disenchanted 'young professionals' in *Gravity's Rainbow*.¹⁷⁵ The distinctly Weberian touch of this wager is owed, as discussed, to particular American circumstances but also prefigured in Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, the wish to 'break through', to escape a world that is perceived to be stagnated, disenchanted, and exhausted, a wish to engage in something 'meaningful', even if it is offered by the devil. Rather than making a perpetual effort to become integrated beings, however, both Wyatt and Slothrop will engage in a Faustian wager in order to overcome their limitations before eventually deciding to "live deliberately" (TR, 900) or become a vital multiplicity of "offshoots" (GR, 742).

Since I argue that the 'key' to the mythography of Gaddis and Pynchon is, like in Mann, an amalgamation of concepts by Goethe, Spengler, and Weber, this brief outline provides the coordinates of my following analyses. After tracing how both portray a world bent towards death and decline, I will examine their characters' fatal bargains before showing how they indicate ways of humane development.

no. 5 (2010): 372-387, and Bernard Duyfhuizen, "'A suspension forever at the hinge of doubt': The Reader-Trap of Bianca in *Gravity's Rainbow*", *Postmodern Culture* 2, no. 1 (1991).

¹⁷⁵ As Sean McCann's observes, in *Gravity's Rainbow* "attention largely is given over to a handful of figures who share an occupational profile with Tyrone Slothrop [...], well-trained employees of military bureaucracies [...]. Each is paid for his (they are almost all men) 'information and expertise,' and each, though with varying degrees of success, strives, in pursuit of some sheerly charismatic and irrational mission, to render himself 'bureaucratic' [...]. We are placed [...] squarely among what Finer called 'a multitude of homunculi,' and the central dilemma these characters face is whether they can, as Finer asked, 'equal a living man'". Sean McCann, "'Down to the people': Pynchon and Schlesinger 'after the imperial presidency'", *Studies in American Fiction* 37, no. 2 (2010): 258.

Part II: Faustian Themes in William Gaddis's *The Recognitions*

Chapter 3: Heretical Negotiations in the Work of William Gaddis

I thought I was the first one to discover that the world was filled with false values and I was going to tell them.
—William Gaddis¹⁷⁶

The employment of Faustian themes in Gaddis's "bop version" (TR, 661) of the myth has hitherto been neglected, if not dismissed in literary scholarship.¹⁷⁷ John Johnston, for instance, denies the integral relevance of the Faust theme, arguing instead for a Deleuzian aesthetic of repetition and difference in which the myth is marginalised to one of many.¹⁷⁸ Klaus Benesch similarly holds:

even though the search for redemption (in the *Clementine Recognitions*) and the search for truth (in the Faust legend) constitute important undercurrents in Gaddis's text, the novel as a whole seems to be driven more specifically by a self-reflexive inquiry into the wide-ranging ramifications of repetition/recognition as pivotal techniques in the cultural accretion of knowledge.¹⁷⁹

What both critics neglect is not just the fact that Gaddis employs the Faust theme consistently throughout the novel, even though its better known versions only surface intermittently. The myth, I contend, is crucial as regards the theme of accruing knowledge, especially in terms of the interrelation of unstable epistemological frameworks and ethics that is also highlighted in Gaddis's affinity with Hans Vaihinger's philosophy of 'as if'.¹⁸⁰ As shown in the first part of my thesis, the Faust

¹⁷⁶ Cited in Elaine B. Safer, "Ironic Allusiveness and Satire in William Gaddis's *The Recognitions*", in *William Gaddis*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2004), 71.

¹⁷⁷ Exceptions are Charles Brownson, *Techniques of Reference, Allusion and Quotation in Thomas Mann's 'Doktor Faustus' and William Gaddis's 'The Recognitions'* (Dissertation. University of Colorado, 1976) and Julián Jiménez Heffernan, "The *Recognitions* by William Gaddis, A Reassessment", in *Figures of Belatedness: Postmodernist Fiction in English*, ed. Javier Gahete and Paula Salván (Cordoba: UDC, 2006), 69-90.

¹⁷⁸ John Johnston, *Carnival of Repetition: Gaddis's The Recognitions and Postmodern Theory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 8.

¹⁷⁹ Klaus Benesch, "In the Diaspora of Words: Gaddis, Kierkegaard, and the Art of Recognition(s)", in *Paper Empire: William Gaddis and the World System*, ed. Joseph Tabbi and Rone Shavers (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007), 37.

¹⁸⁰ The encyclopaedic character of *The Recognitions* should not distract from the fact that Gaddis not only frequently pointed out that he was mainly interested in the ethical implications of technologies and utilised knowledge. Vaihinger's philosophy, like Nietzsche's, played a crucial part in this respect; see van Ewijk, "Life Must Be Led in the Dark", 372-87; John Soutter, "The *Recognitions* and *Carpenter's Gothic*: Gaddis's Anti-Pauline Novels", in *William Gaddis, "The Last of Something"*:

myth can neither be fully conceptualised as a quest for truth nor as an interaction with a devil of sorts. Its modern varieties are not primarily religiously biased negotiations of heresies but about the achievement of human supremacy and perfection by means of techniques at the cost of the *conditio humana* itself. The latter exactly describes Gaddis's basic concerns. As the author notes, *The Recognitions* was an "attempt to set the then current life in a large perspective", and I argue that the Faust myth plays a pivotal role in this agenda.¹⁸¹ It does not only set into perspective the ascent of the Apollonian age, the height of which Pynchon later describes in *Gravity's Rainbow*.¹⁸² It also provides a key angle for assessing the demise of Gaddis's artist figures, who have long been mistaken for as advocates of his own aesthetic or innocent victims of the logic of capital. Gaddis, again, stated in an interview: "The suggestion that I write about business destroying the innocent artist is simplistic", adding that any attentive reader will notice that his "artists [are] digging their own grave".¹⁸³ They most often do so by conning themselves into complicity with the commodity based systems and 'grab-all-you-can' mentality of a society that has exchanged "the remnants of the things worth being for those presumably worth having".¹⁸⁴ As I will argue in my analysis of *The Recognitions*, this insight is not only exemplified in the rise and fall of the novel's protagonist, the painter Wyatt Gwyon, but is also the basic narrative of Goethe's *Faust*, the individual working with the dominant forces of one's time toward one's peril while deeming oneself in the service of a higher cause.

After briefly treating Gaddis's conception of myth and *The Recognitions* as a 'last Christian novel', I will therefore discuss his use of the two main narrative templates between which the novel's perspective shifts, that is, the Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions* and Goethe's *Faust*.¹⁸⁵ The first part of my analysis focuses on Gaddis's

Critical Essays, ed. Crystal Alberts *et al.* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2010), 115; Peter Wolfe, *A Vision of His Own: The Mind and Art of William Gaddis* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1997), 72.

¹⁸¹ Tom LeClair, "An Interview with William Gaddis, circa 1980", in *Paper Empire: William Gaddis and the World System*, ed. Joseph Tabbi and Rone Shavers (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2007), 26.

¹⁸² Several critics have noted this particular aspect. David Madden, for instance, describes *The Recognitions* as "a prophetic book, depicting horrors of the fifties that [...] anticipate the realities of the seventies". Cited in Paul Ingendaay, *Die Romane von William Gaddis* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 1993), i.

¹⁸³ LeClair, "An Interview with William Gaddis", 20.

¹⁸⁴ Elaine B. Safer, "Ironic Allusiveness and Satire in William Gaddis's *The Recognitions*", 71, 74. The Weberian critique of the spirit of capitalism comes clearly to the fore in this context.

¹⁸⁵ The Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions* and *Faust* are the "two main narrative templates" for *The Recognitions* that also "provide the historical poles" between which "the novel's encyclopedic perspective shifts". Steven Burn, "The Collapse of Everything: William Gaddis and the Encyclopaedic

satiric take on religious soteriology. Discussing his employment of the ‘oldest version’ of the Faust myth, I argue that *The Recognitions* subverts Christian and particularly Puritan soteriological dogmata. It thereby satirises orthodox claims, be they formulated by Saint Paul or the Synod of Dort, but also offers itself to be read as an ideological inversion of the Faust myth.

The second part of my analysis is a close reading of Wyatt’s bargain with a ring of art dealers. After briefly examining Gaddis’s own assessment of art production among his contemporaries, in which a sense of artistic community and inspiration are sacrificed for the cult of personality and originality, I show how *The Recognitions* conveys a Spenglerian vision of the U.S. post-war metropolitan art world that draws its material mainly from Huizinga. Synthesising the artistic and religious dimension, I will then point to intersections with the central concerns of Mann’s *Doctor Faustus* and argue that Wyatt’s wager is strikingly close to that of the latter’s protagonist, the composer Adrian Leverkühn. Wyatt’s deal with the devils of materialism does not only enable him to overcome an impasse of art production and his own limitations. With his paranoid recreation of the Flemish Primitives’ work ethic he aspires to ‘forge gold’, to redeem art from its status as a commodity, and by doing so he also intends to redeem his own ‘fallen’ self. In his bargain, however, he will remain within the Puritan coordinates he has come to detest through his upbringing and, even more so, be fully complicit with the capitalist principles against which he purportedly acts.

In a concluding section I will show how *The Recognitions* then merges the stories of Faust and the Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions* in order to model the painter’s ‘salvation’. Here I show how Gaddis ironically depicts Wyatt’s abandonment of the need to atone for his sense of depravity in an instance of ‘redeeming love’ that triggers his ‘*metanoia*’, a conscious turn from both his New England past and life in the ivory tower of art. Relating this turn with his newly discovered practice of ‘restoring’ old masterpieces, I argue that the novel ambiguously depicts this move both as a liberating gesture that paves way to existential openness and as a destabilising dismissal of epistemological frameworks.

Novel”, in *Paper Empire: William Gaddis and the World System*, ed. Joseph Tabbi and Rone Shavers (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2007), 54. One might add that one ‘silent partner’ is Mann’s *Doctor Faustus*, the relations to which I discuss at a later point.

1. Faustian Layers

Und Faust ist nicht mein wahres Ich.
—Nikolaus Lenau, *Faust*¹⁸⁶

In some senses, *Faust* can be said to be a guiding myth for almost the entirety of Gaddis's oeuvre, and even his *modus operandi* resembled Goethe's life-long labour on *Faust*.¹⁸⁷ The former's artistically productive interest in the soul-seller can be traced to his earliest literary works. Agrippa's *On the Vanity and Incertitude of all the Arts and Sciences* (1530), which stands behind Faust's first monologue, for instance, is reflected in various forms of Gaddis's lasting discontent with capitalised reason. Several poems published in the Harvard Lampoon bear witness to the 'madness' of a world "governed entirely by science" and knowledge for knowledge's sake, that is, without values.¹⁸⁸ The myth here becomes a blueprint for the fatal quest for knowledge, be it inside or outside sanctioned avenues: "From dreams of god-like knowledge you will wake/ To fear, in which your very soul shall quake".¹⁸⁹ Gaddis's first treatment of Faust is his poem "Non Disputandum", which appeared in the June 1944 edition of the Harvard Lampoon, not long before he left university without a degree:

Could I sell my illusive soul
And draw my name upon the scroll
Of Mephistopheles,

¹⁸⁶ Nikolaus Lenau, *Faust: Ein Gedicht*, ed. Hartmut Steinecke (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2004), 127.

¹⁸⁷ Apart from his early poems and *The Recognitions*, references to *Faust* can be found in *J R*, where the sense of the double wager with a predetermined outcome is questioned. William Gaddis, *J R* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003), 391 (hereafter cited in text as JR). *Faust* is also alluded to in *Agapē Agape*, where the narrator relates Faust's proposition to Mephistopheles to dare deceive him with pleasure (F, 1695-1700) to the culture industry as represented by the player piano (AA, 13-14). As regards both authors' way of working I would like to point to an amusing, yet elucidating parallel. Hans Blumenberg discusses how Goethe answered a visitor "who inquired about his (already notorious) *Faust*, by emptying a bag full of scraps of paper on the table before him and pointing to it with the words, 'Voilà mon Faust!'" Hans Blumenberg, *Work on Myth: Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1985), 278. While Paul Valéry took up this idea and incorporated it in his deliberately fragmentary play *Mon Faust (Ebauches)* (1941/1945), Gaddis seems to have been personally celebrating such fragmentation while he wrote *The Recognitions*, carrying on his travels through Europe and Latin America "large sacks of newspaper clippings and notes" he was to incorporate into the novel. David Koenig, "The Writing of *The Recognitions*", in *In Recognition of William Gaddis*, ed. John Kuehl and Steven Moore (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1984), 22. In equal terms, Gaddis was still labouring on the novel's conclusion long after it had been published (cf. Joseph Tabbi, "Afterword", AA, 69).

¹⁸⁸ Peter William Koenig, "Splinters from the Yew Tree:" *A Critical Study of William Gaddis's 'The Recognitions'* (Dissertation. New York University, 1971), 8.

¹⁸⁹ Goethe, *Faust I*, cited in Burn, "The Collapse of Everything", 52.

To gambol as did Goethe's Faust
Remain perpetually soused
Sans limits, sans degrees,

I'd seek his stygian address,
Assail the gates, demand access
To pleasure sempiternal;

Then live incessantly in lust,
Devour the cake, abjure the crust,
Plunge in deceit diurnal;

Cavort relentlessly in sin,
And laugh and love, and frail and spin
To pay the toll.

But life's insidious demand
Prevails; there is no devil, and
I have no soul.¹⁹⁰

Most fascinating about these adolescent tercets are the first and last stanzas, the renunciation of metaphysical concepts of evil and human essence. One can also already see an ironic inversion of the myth and with that the nucleus of the parody that was to form the core of *The Recognitions*. As Gaddis writes: "When I started this thing ... it was to be a good deal shorter, and quite explicitly a parody on the FAUST story, except the artist taking the place of the learned doctor".¹⁹¹ As to why he chose Goethe's epic poem, Gaddis noted:

[...] in this story I think the Faust theme is obvious, isn't it? Here's the man, perfectly prepared but unsatisfied with possible outlets; sold over to sinful commission [sic] that is, to falsifying art which is the thing he holds most sacred so it is the most evil he can do; with his mind corrupting Esme until she is lost; damned himself; and at last redeemed through love [...]¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ Koenig, *Splinters*, 8.

¹⁹¹ Cited in Koenig, *Splinters*, 30. In another note Gaddis writes: "it began with the Otto-Wyatt-Esther triangle, and progressed openly as it does here, in the first part; though the original intention, closely following FAUST, was Wyatt-Esme as Faust-Gretchen, and Esme's damnation through Wyatt's negation of her (as a model in forgeries; and his refusal to love her)" (*ibid.*).

¹⁹² Koenig, *Splinters*, 61.

This parody was originally to end on such an explicitly redemptive note, but at a later stage Gaddis cut out the child “who was to represent purity (like Helen of Troy in *Faust*), and reduced Esme to a suggestion of the innocence which (as with Gretchen) could have redeemed Wyatt”.¹⁹³ While these alterations may have obscured to some extent the underlying narrative of both parts of *Faust*, the Goethean core was also supplemented by other texts associated with soul selling and questing. The most palpable of these are: *The Recognitions of Clement*, Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, Henrik Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt*, and C. G. Jung’s *The Integration of the Personality*.¹⁹⁴ As regards these, the data from Moore’s *Reader’s Guide* provides a fairly comprehensive picture: there are less than ten references to the Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions*, about four to Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* and about twenty to Goethe’s text.¹⁹⁵ *The Recognitions of Clement* occur in two epigraphs and a few quotations in the main text, all of which focus the theme of salvation and are strongly associated with the bargain inspired by Goethe’s drama.¹⁹⁶ Several more allusions refer to St. Clement of Rome and his papal monogram (an anchor). References to Marlowe’s text predominantly occur in chapters II.2 and II.3, mostly in association with the Seven Deadly Sins (covetousness in particular). Allusions to *Faust* are similarly featured in the chapters with Brown and Valentine, although some occur outside the central axis of the novel but spread further out, comprising a wide variety of alterations. Elements from *Peer Gynt* appear mostly in association with the art

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁹⁴ The record of Gaddis’s working library lists several works related to the Faust myth, including Ivan Goncharov’s *Oblomov*, George Haimsohn’s *The Bedside Faust*, Eugene O’Neill’s *The Great God Bown*, and Paul Valéry’s *Mon Faust. Ebauches* (cf. William Gaddis, *William Gaddis Papers*, Washington University Special Collections Library, St. Louis, MO).

¹⁹⁵ Steven Moore incorporates in his *Reader’s Guide* the results of the doctoral theses by Minkoff, Koenig, and Brownson without losing the critical view on the entirety of source-texts. Safer also contributes substantially to the identification of allusions (“Ironic Allusiveness”, 71-100). Johnston mentions some connections to Goethe’s play although partly with erratic references (*Carnival of Repetition*, 166). Peter Wolfe’s partly idiosyncratic re-interpretations, as inspiring as they may be, are not taken into account here. Without diminishing his work one has to observe his too morphologically inclined reading of Goethe and Marlowe. His argument that Wyatt lacks the boldness of other Faust figures (*A Vision*, 125-26), for instance, disregards how torn Faustus and hesitant Faust are. Brilliant, however, is the elucidation of Wyatt’s visit in a Turkish bath in *The Recognitions* (TR, 585, 587), a parallel to the devil’s visit in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* (*A Vision*, 117).

¹⁹⁶ The Pseudo-Clementine epigraphs in *The Recognitions* are intimately connected to the Faust-core of the novel. The strong formal correlation between the references to two sets of literary models enforces the cohesion between Wyatt’s *alter egos* Clement and Faust, but it also establishes an ironic perspective onto the plot, especially the passages framing Wyatt’s bargain with Brown. In terms of formal arrangement, the epigraphs introduce two chapters (I, 3 and II, 2) of the tripartite Goethe ‘parody’ revolving around the Faustian constellation between Wyatt, Otto, Esther, Esme and Brown. Allusions to the Pseudo-Clementines outside this core are restricted to comments by Valentine and Anselm whereas references to Clement and his symbol of martyrdom occur throughout the text.

dealer Recktall Brown (half Mephistopheles, half Ibsen's troll king) and Wyatt's deluded perception, a feature that is, in turn, related to Goethe's blind protagonist. Marlowe's and Goethe's texts are less directly featured in the last part of the novel. Although Ibsen's is still referred to, the focus is shifted to Pseudo-Clemente and several catchphrases from Jungian psycho-alchemy, which extensively draws from Jung's reading of Goethe. In brief, the revised novel was to display:

Also the Flying Dutchman, condemned to sail without ever making port.

Also the hero of the Odyssey, but here a no-hero on a voyage no-voyage to a Penelope no-Penelope until he finds her.

Also Peer Gynt, and his Where have I been all this time?

Also and most importantly Christ, but here suffering death-in-life, and resurrection, that is!

the guilty idealism at first; the crash of personality; then, the two brought together (not compromised) through love [...] ¹⁹⁷

However, rather than readily dismissing elements of the myth in *The Recognitions* as more or less relevant residues among "many myths of redemption", ¹⁹⁸ I think the consistency with which so many echoes of Pseudo-Clemente, Marlowe, and Goethe are placed within the novel raises serious doubts about the marginality of the myth. Given Gaddis's concern with forgery and originality it is no wonder that he simultaneously exploits and subverts his sources by juxtaposing different versions of a myth that has hardly one 'original'. More importantly, however, there is also a palpable relation to the interplay of quest motifs as prefigured in *The Magic Mountain* and later expounded on in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. ¹⁹⁹ Like Mann's novel, *The Recognitions* can in fact be understood as a search for salvation. ²⁰⁰ Like Hans Castorp and Tyrone Slothrop, Wyatt pursues the purest and highest, a mode of perfection described in alchemical terms as the *lapis philosophorum* or, in his words, the forging

¹⁹⁷ Gaddis working notes, cited in Koenig, *Splinters*, 66.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁹⁹ I will discuss this relation in detail in the context of Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. Gaddis was in possession of a 1927 edition of Mann's novel, but it is beyond my knowledge whether he had read it before or while composing *The Recognitions*. Similarly, although Gaddis was familiar with the Atlantic Monthly, which had published his "'Stop Player. Joke No. 4.'" in 1951, I could not ascertain whether he was familiar with Mann's essay "The Making of the *Magic Mountain*" (discussed later), which appeared in the same periodical in 1953.

²⁰⁰ Gaddis writes in a working note: "since the whole of the thing [*The Recognitions*] argues against the Reasonable pragmatic dismissal of history without real sin or real salvation which we've managed, and the no-hero's story is one of working out a number of myths to redemption, the RECOGNITIONS is a direct reflection, or recognition, of this. His work is *recognition*, which is what art is I believe" (cited in Koenig, *Splinters*, 66).

of gold (TR, 689). Yet, whereas Mann and Pynchon present their initiates as more (Castorp) or less (Slothrop) innocent fools, Gaddis's painter pursues his quest for redemption in a manner akin to that of Mann's Faustian composer Leverkühn. In order to substantiate this claim, and since an adequate representation of the socio-cultural economies of Gaddis's novel is unfeasible without a treatment of its theological dimension, I will first examine the latter before turning to Wyatt's failed endeavour to redeem what he perceives to be fallen art. I will start my analysis with a brief discussion of the soteriological trench fights in Gaddis's first Faustian source.

2. Quests for Salvation: *The Recognitions of Clement*

- Scatological?
- Eschatological, the doctrine of last things ...
- Good lord, Willie, you are drunk. Either that or you're writing for a very small audience.
- William Gaddis, *The Recognitions*²⁰¹

Gaddis's earliest source associated with the Faust myth is certainly not merely "talk, talk, talk" (TR, 372) as one of his characters suggests. Although Clement is posed as a protagonist, it soon transpires that he is much more a trajectory for the reader's identification, an exemplary test case in eschatology, for the Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions* are less about an individual's struggle for salvation than a thorough negotiation of rivalling systems of belief represented by Clement's guide Saint Peter and the latter's adversary, the 'father of all heretics', Gnostic Simon Magus.²⁰²

Over ten books the reader follows the voyages of Clement. The Roman's doubts over whether there is life after death have him first seek consolation in philosophy. Dissatisfied with what the discipline has to offer, however, he turns from the vain science and tries to verify the immortality of his soul as follows:

I shall proceed to Egypt, and there I shall cultivate the friendship of the hierophants or prophets, who preside at the shrines. Then I shall win over a magician by money, and entreat him, by what they call the necromantic art, to bring me a soul from the infernal regions, as if I

²⁰¹ Gaddis, *The Recognitions*, 478.

²⁰² The *Recognitions of Clement* are alternatively referred to as the Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions*, or, together with the *Homilies*, as Pseudo-Clementines. The authorship of both works was wrongly ascribed to Saint Clement of Rome, the first Apostolic Father, mainly because of the Clement featured in these theological romances.

were desirous of consulting it about some business. But this shall be my consultation, whether the soul be immortal.²⁰³

Before actually pursuing such pagan lapse, Clement hears of the Messiah's promise to give "eternal life to every one who will hear Him" (CR, 147). Thus, he wanders toward Judea and, as Christ is not to be found, eventually makes acquaintance with Peter, who systematically instructs him in the doctrines of Christianity, including harsh refutations of Jews, Pharisees and Samaritans. The main body of the text then serves as a verbal exemplification of the latter as it mainly encompasses Peter's public disputations with Simon of Samaria (Simon Magus), in which the Christian version is demonstrated to be superior to Gnostic beliefs. From Orphic rites to matters of astrological predetermination, any rival system is refuted as an expression of "folly", "ignorance", "presumption", "evil" and "drunkenness". Predictably, the comparison between Peter and Simon strongly disfavours the Gnostic, for as much Peter is cordial and modest, so is Simon portrayed as the great antagonist, power-monger and demonic magician, wicked and vain, whose repetitively paratactic boasting culminates in an expression of uttermost self-deification, the hubristic claim of man to be God:

I can change my countenance, so that I cannot be recognised; but I can show people that I have two faces. I shall change myself into a sheep or a goat; I shall make a beard to grow upon little boys; I shall ascend by flight into the air; I shall exhibit abundance of gold, and shall make and unmake kings. I shall be worshipped as God [...] (CR, 198)

With such a gesture he not only prefigures a motif recurrent in Faust texts,²⁰⁴ he also presents an attractive alternative to Christian soteriology. His account unfolds as follows:

Simon took Luna to himself; and with her he still goes about, as you see, deceiving multitudes, and asserting that he himself is a certain power which is above God the Creator, while Luna, who is with him, has been brought down from the higher heavens, and that she is Wisdom, the mother of all things, for whom, says he, the Greeks and barbarians contending,

²⁰³Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, vol. 3, *Tatian, Theophilus, and the Clementine Recognitions* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1867, hereafter cited in text as CR).

²⁰⁴ See Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston: Bacon Press, 1972), 103-11.

were able in some measure to see an image of her; but of herself, as she is, as the dweller with the first and only God, they were wholly ignorant. (CR, 199)²⁰⁵

The doctrinal import of this “piece of showmanship”, of going about with Wisdom brought down from heaven, becomes apparent in other versions of Simon’s account:

[...] he took with him a woman called Helena whom he said he had found in a brothel in Tyre and who according to him was the latest and lowliest incarnation of the fallen “Thought” of God, redeemed by him and a means of redemption for all who believed in them both.²⁰⁶

As impressive as this might be, Simon cannot convince the Christians, and he is quickly discredited (spiritually and personally) and flees. Only well into the second half of the text is another theme introduced. Clement gives an account of his youth from which one learns that his mother Matthidia followed a horrible vision and went into hiding with his twin brothers Faustinus and Faustus.²⁰⁷ His sorrowful father Faustianus followed them, leaving Clement behind. On hearing the story, the Christian prophet offers help in reuniting the family. The reestablishment of familial bonds now becomes the explicit goal. The spiritual counterpart of travel, however, the voyage to salvation, remains a remarkably dominant ‘subplot’, for only the aid of Saint Peter leads to the recognition of kin, effectively rendering true faith a precondition of personal consolation and social practice (i.e. the acknowledgement of one’s ‘neighbour’). Clement soon finds the mother and the twins in the foreign lands. Not much later they also encounter the father, but before their final recognition the voyagers are engaged in yet further discussions with heretics, to finally encounter Simon Magus again. As one of his last ‘tricks’ the magus projects his face onto Clement’s father so that Faustianus cannot be recognised by his family. When the Gnostic is finally defeated and, thanks to Peter’s theological superiority and benevolence, regrets his presumption, he wants to undo his spell, however, only to see

²⁰⁵ In the Simonian system Luna, or Helena, represents the Thought (*Epinoia*) who has fallen away from the Thinking or Mind (*Nous*) like the Sophia of other Gnostic systems (cf. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 108-9). The names Luna and Helena are related to the Greek lunar deity Σελήνη ‘moon’. Often *moon* was merely an exoteric name for Sophia, Holy Spirit or Epinoia in Gnostic texts. The association moon-Helena is often expounded in Faust texts. Also, one of Gaddis’s most important mythographical sources, Robert Graves’s *The White Goddess*, contains abundant references to the moon goddess, not seldom in idiosyncratic associations worthy of the caprices in Gaddis’s own text.

²⁰⁶ Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 104.

²⁰⁷ The names Faust, Faustinus and Faustianus are to be read in the Latin sense ‘luck’ or ‘favour’ rather than in the post-Renaissance connotation of soul-selling and hubris associated with Faust and Faustus.

that the father's face has already been restored through the accomplishment of Christ (CR, 468). When Faustus regains his own face and the family is reunited for good, Simon himself is crudely defaced. Ironic as regards the latter, as John Sutter notes, certainly is that "another of Gaddis's sources for *The Recognitions* argues that the Simon Magus of the Clementine Recognitions is [Saint] Paul 'under a mask'".²⁰⁸

3. Sacrilege in the Service of Its Adversary

If American post-war society represents a world in which everything that poses as good is in the service of the 'adversary', it is no wonder that Gaddis employs a great deal of 'wickedness' and 'hell fire' like Hawthorne and Melville. In 1927, T. S. Eliot wrote that the blasphemy so crucial to Christopher Marlowe's work necessarily implies belief: "But Marlowe, the most thoughtful, the most blasphemous (and, therefore, probably the most Christian) of his contemporaries, is always an exception".²⁰⁹ In an unused prefatory note to *The Recognitions* Gaddis directly reflects on Eliot's remark:

Then, what is sacrilege? If it is nothing more than a rebellion against dogma, it is eventually as meaningless as the dogma it defies. [...] Only a religious person can perpetrate sacrilege: and if its blasphemy reaches the heart of the question; if it investigates deeply enough to unfold, not the pattern, but the materials of the pattern, and the necessity of a pattern; if it questions so deeply that the doubt it arouses is frightening and cannot be dismissed; then it has done its true sacrilegious work, in the service of its adversary: the only service that nihilism can ever perform.²¹⁰

Gaddis, as Knight observes, tends to "approach the positive via the avenue of the negative".²¹¹ Such a strategy is first and foremost manifest in *The Recognitions* in the

²⁰⁸ Soutter, "*The Recognitions* and *Carpenter's Gothic*", 118.

²⁰⁹ T. S. Eliot, "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca", in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), 133.

²¹⁰ Cited in Koenig, "Recognizing Gaddis' 'Recognitions'", 70 (spelling edited).

²¹¹ Christopher J. Knight, "Trying to Make Negative Things Do the Work of Positive Ones: Gaddis and Apophaticism", in *William Gaddis, 'The Last of Something': Critical Essays*, ed. Crystal Alberts *et al.* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2010), 59. Knight relates this apophaticism to "Eliotian indirection and Waughian satire" (*ibid.*). While Gaddis is indebted to Eliot and Waugh in this respect, I would refrain from overstressing the religious dimension entailed in such shared attributes and assuming Catholic undercurrents in Gaddis's work, as Kathryn Hume recently has, for instance, in the case of Pynchon in "The Religious and Political Vision of Pynchon's *Against the Day*", *Philological Quarterly* 86.1-2 (2007): 163-87. As argued, despite some positive attributions of Catholicism as

plethora of artistic and personal failures this narrative encyclopaedia of collapse depicts. It is even also so manifest in Gaddis's use of black humour, but most explicitly in his fondness for aporia.²¹² As he explains:

NEW (for me) WORD: APORIA (from a Gertrude Himmelfarb review)/ 'difference, discontinuity, disparity, contradiction, discord, ambiguity, irony, paradox, perversity, opacity, obscurity, anarchy, chaos'/ LONG LIVE!²¹³

But despite such heretical turbulences, one should not interpret Gaddis's intention to write the "last Christian" novel "solely as an emancipatory gesture", as Birger Vanwesenbeeck argues, for too many textual indicators suggest the opposite, not least the fact that he borrowed for his own services the title of the "first Christian novel" (TR, 373), as one of his characters calls the theological romance.²¹⁴ Even if Gaddis attempts nothing less than to debunk religious grand narratives, he conveys a sense of admiration for the past. And even though he does question the sanity of those concocting soteriological fictions as tools of sovereignty, be it Saint Paul's vision or Puritan doctrines of salvation, he does not abandon the search for transcendence and thereby does not dismiss the latter entirely as a form of 'escape', as I would argue Pynchon does.²¹⁵ *The Recognitions*, as Vanwesenbeeck notes, follows

regards specific sensibilities (a certain exuberance, sense of mystery, and veneration of the past), both authors refrain from presenting the latter as a viable grand narrative and remain within the domain of 'negative theology' (cf. Pynchon's treatment in *V.*, as discussed later). As regards tenable indicators in Gaddis's texts, for instance, it suffices to observe that he appropriates early Christian concepts, such as agapistic communities, for secular purposes. Both the plot of the novel and the copious references to the Pauline concept of redemption and love, for instance, point to what Slavoj Žižek describes as a postsecular turn to "a Christianity focused on Agape" (Žižek and Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 255); cf. Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 123-24.

²¹² The mode of humour characteristic of Gaddis and Pynchon is fittingly described by Doug Haynes as "harshly self-critical, dwelling precisely on that boundary between the promise of artistic redemption and a recognition of the latter's impossibility in reality". Doug Haynes, "The Persistence of Irony: Interfering with Surrealist Black Humour", *Textual Practice* 20, no. 1 (2006): 44.

²¹³ Cited in Joseph Tabbi, "Introduction to the Other Writings", AA 89). Tabbi has also described Pynchon's style in similar terms, arguing, that 'pre-emptive deconstruction' does not necessarily amount to relativism (*Postmodern Sublime*, 93).

²¹⁴ Birger Vanwesenbeeck, "Agapē Agape: The Last Christian Novel(s) of William Gaddis", in *William Gaddis, 'The Last of Something': Critical Essays*, ed. Crystal Alberts et al. (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2010), 88.

²¹⁵ Spengler's work may have been of interest in soteriological terms for Gaddis since it continues the anti-Pauline tradition represented by Nietzsche and Vaihinger. Spengler, who mentions the "anti-Pauline Pseudo-Clementines" (DW, 1:237), describes Paul as an urban self-infatuated intellectual with an apocalyptic obsession, whose "salvation certainty" (DW, 1:221) after his conversion on the road to Damascus, was later institutionalised and turned into political authority by the church. Gaddis follows suit in this respect, as Soutter notes, in that he "doubts the efficacy of a soteriology that is but a personal "hodgepodge system" assumed as a collective absolute. He is sceptical of a system whose basic tenet - salvation for all - is not even formulated upon another's personal experience of Christ's

an eschatological poetics that constitutes as much a heretical gesture bent on provocation as that it reflects an attempt to ground oneself within a pre-existing literary tradition, no matter how ill- or non-defined.²¹⁶

As further representatives of this tradition one could mention Spengler, Huizinga, and partly Graves, who all describe the ‘end of something’, but also certainly Goethe, whose *Faust*, as argued, describes in the emergent modern world system the decline of an older order. It is no surprise that Gaddis, who held that he was writing the last Christian novel, does not unconditionally laud the ‘new’ but presents the American socio-cultural transformations after the Second World War with a nostalgic tenor. What the novel laments, as Christopher Knight argues, is the loss of a cultural grand narrative.²¹⁷ To the same degree it pillories a form of social entropy, the eradication of a sense of togetherness in one’s work and life and the systematic undermining of possibilities of connecting to a “self who can do more” (TR, 253) in a socio-cultural simulacrum solely determined by instrumental rationality and economic principles. While Gaddis draws from versions of the Faust myth in order to characterise these transformations in religious and mythical terms, he substantially uses Huizinga in order to contextualise them culturally. His implied correlation between the emergent Renaissance and the art world in post-war America thereby also provides an answer to why the Faust myth is selected as the novel’s core. Both periods are characterised by a sense of loss, the exhaustion of creative possibilities, the failure of epistemological frameworks, and not least a shift from ‘authentic’ art of social and spiritual import toward reckless individualism and the fake. In this context, Faust does not only represent a model of the deluded overreacher who succumbs to carnal pleasures and simulacra. The Faustian search for self-made redemption, the transcendence of one’s own limitations, is also presented as a symptom of the sensitive mind in search for a better life, the desperate grasping of an individual that has lost credulity in the order of things. Thus, even if Gaddis’s attempt at writing the last Christian novel appears no less hubristic than the flight of the magus, it still suggests a longing for a holistic universe; it is, to use one of its character’s words, “not entirely a pose” (TR, 651).

crucifixion and resurrection, but upon a theory taken from a hallucination of these improbable events” (*The Recognitions and Carpenter’s Gothic*, 118).

²¹⁶ Vanwesenbeeck, “*Agapē Agape*”, 88.

²¹⁷ Knight, “Trying to Make Negative Things”, 55. This Janus-headed character of the novel is one reason why it refuses to be classified as fully postmodern. Critics have long read it as a late modernist novel, as Ingendaay point out (*Die Romane*, v, vii, 51-56). Although Johnston argues the opposite, he dutifully ignores modernist aspects of the novel (cf. *ibid.*, 52-53).

The most crucial difference between the ‘first’ and ‘last’ Christian novel however, is the latter’s aversion of absolutism. Just as one can identify in Pynchon a unconditioned refusal to subscribe to absolutisms and religious anti-intellectualism, Gaddis’s heretical destabilisations of reified doxa, be they religious or scientific, and his exploitation of the first Christian romance indeed challenges single visions and religious ‘myths’. Such multi-perspectival dialogue comes to the fore in Wyatt’s *psychaomachia*, as represented by three major characters of the novel, Wyatt’s Puritan aunt May, the materialistic art dealer Reck tall Brown, and the art critic, lapsed Jesuit, and ascetic Gnostic Basil Valentine, who are equally decisive for the spiritual ‘education’ of the young Clement/Faust. More crucially, however, Gaddis expounds and subverts the soteriological absolutisms conveyed in his source. As Kirsten Grimstad notes, the “heritage of Simon Magus consists of [...] two opposing stories of damnation and redemption playing against one another”, with the Christian prevailing in the Pseudo-Clementines.²¹⁸ Gaddis’s treatment, in contrast, is highly ambiguous, for despite the epigraph of the novel provided by the anti-heretic Irenaeus, there resides a devilish incertitude in the “pervasive system of equivocation, inversion, and paradox that permeates the very fabric” of his text.²¹⁹ In his *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Pierre Bourdieu gives a well-known definition of orthodoxy as a straightened opinion as opposed to heterodoxy, that is, the notion of competing possibilities that neither excludes choice (*hairesis*) nor an assessment of the sum total of alternatives not chosen.²²⁰ Such a definition already implies how orthodox claims of self-evidence and indisputability can be challenged: either by a critique of the ways that have been chosen or, more subversively, by retaining heresy (choice) on the horizon of perception through its circulation in the discursive field.²²¹ Gaddis, following such principles, ensures to undermine seemingly self-evident notions *ab ovo*. The novel starts with an exemplary exercise in relativism with the account of the

²¹⁸ See Kirsten J. Grimstad, *The Modern Revival of Gnosticism and Thomas Mann’s ‘Doktor Faustus’* (Rochester: Camden House, 2002), 154-55.

²¹⁹ Hans Rudolf Vietgen attests such a system in Thomas Mann’s *Doktor Faustus* in “Amazing Grace. Thomas Mann, Adorno, and the Faust Myth”, *Our Faust? Roots and Ramifications of a Modern German Myth*, ed. R. Grimm and J. Hermand (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 168-89.

²²⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (New York/ London: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 169-70.

²²¹ The latter mechanism is well represented in Gnostic hermeneutics, which is based to a great extent on the reading against the grain of Christian myth. The inverted allegoresis explicit in Gnostic cosmogony, for instance, the association of the Demiurge Ialdabaoth with the God of the Old Testament or the ironic questioning of Mary’s Immaculate Conception in the Valentinian *Gospel of Truth* are but two examples of the possibilities of “blatantly subverting the meaning of the most firmly established [...] elements of tradition” (Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 92).

death of Wyatt's mother Camilla that satirises Puritan predestinationism by rendering her death and burial a farcical series of accidents. Camilla, as problematic a "virgin" mother as Mary in the *Gospel of Truth* (TR, 13), dies on a cruise: "On All Saint's Day [...] God boarded the Purdue Victory and acted: Camilla was stricken with acute appendicitis" (TR, 4). Despite the mock-providential tenor, it is unclear whether divine intervention or human failure eventually lead to the loss of her life, for the counterfeit ship's doctor Sinisterra is far better in making the sign of the cross than in surgery (TR, 4-5). Camilla's husband, Reverend Gwyon, does not want to transfer the corpse back to New England (an unthinkable lapse in the mind of his relatives), so that although her Protestant "cadaver was obviously heretical in origin" (TR, 6), she is nevertheless buried among Catholics in the Spanish town San Zwingli.²²² The ironic compensation of this incident follows several hundred pages later in the novel with Camilla's cockeyed canonisation. Since the graves are not labelled, her corpse is mistaken for the one of a "martyr", a girl who was raped to death by a man who followed a superstitious account that venereal disease can be cured by sleeping with virgins. A similar relativism is exerted in the character of Reverend Gwyon. When he finds his son ill with fever and the doctors unable to procure a cure, he identifies the emblem of medicine, the caduceus as "the scepter of a pagan god, the scepter of Hermes. Hermes, the patron of eloquence and cunning, of trickery and theft, the very wand he carried when he conducted souls to Hell" (TR, 46).²²³ The irony in his tirade against 'paganism' is that he not only bears the name of the shape-shifter of Welsh myth, that is, that he himself is a pagan in disguise, but most of all that he later saves the life of his fatally ill son by sacrificing the Barbary ape Heracles in a Frazerian ritual of homeopathic magic.²²⁴

²²² The latter is a comic *contradictio in adjecto*, for the Swiss reformer Huldrych Zwingli, after whom the fictive town is named, has a decidedly heretic touch in a Catholic environment.

²²³ For this concept of magic see Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Religion and Magic* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1993), 12. The ritual itself is described *ibid.*, 569.

²²⁴ As regards Wyatt's further course, Gaddis insidiously plays with notions of human agency and predestination. He suggests stellar influences as significant for the course of action, for instance, as in Camilla's fatal appendicitis on All Saints' Day. Notions of predestination also come to the fore when Wyatt is renamed Stephen at the end of his journey and people he has never encountered before call him by this name, which his parents had intended for him in the first place (TR, 867, cf. 27). Moreover, Wyatt continually refers to a character in Pedro Calderón de la Barca's play *La Vida es sueño* (1635), the Polish prince Sigismundo, who was imprisoned as a child because the stars predicted his tyranny and cruelty. Rendering the prediction a self-fulfilling prophecy when he was released, Sigismundo was imprisoned again, and, in Calderón's account, consequently thought that his brief enjoyment of freedom was merely a dream. In a similar manner, Gaddis subverts the predestinarian propaganda of Wyatt's aunt May with contradicting mythological perspectives, for instance in the circumstances of May's death that occurs after Gwyon's ape Heracles has destroyed her beloved hawthorn tree. A

Although the sheer abundance of such twists spans over the whole encyclopaedia of ideas, from Averroes to Zoroaster, the most daring paradoxes in *The Recognitions* are found in the domain of doctrines of salvation. Gwyon's ancestor, the missionary John H., for instance, had to hear from "Indians whose myth he had tried to replace with his own" that his version of the truth was "rank presumption" (TR, 8) before he was eaten, and Gwyon eagerly points out in one of his sermons that Moses is accused of witchcraft in the Koran (TR, 55, cf. 913). The guild of Flemish painters admired by Wyatt as a community of purists and redeemers, are identified as an association of philistine rent-a-painters obsessively trying to avert the *horror vacui* of a world without God's graceful gaze. As amusing as these relations may be, they constantly urge us to reassess if not entirely abandon our notions of saintliness in Gaddis's universe, in which not only the devil is the father of false art (TR, 646) and "the evil spirits practice mimicry" (TR, 535-36, 719) but in which Saints are counterfeits of Jesus and Jesus a counterfeit of God (TR, 483). Crucial in this respect are the two epigraphs taken from Pseudo-Clemente framing the Faust-core narrative of the novel. The first Pseudo-Clementine epigraph, taken from the section "Self-Love the Foundation of Goodness", opens the chapter in which Wyatt and Brown agree on their collaboration (TR, 78). The passage reads:

First of all, then, he is evil, in the judgment of God, who will not inquire what is advantageous to himself. For how can any one love another, if he does not love himself? [Or to whom will that man not be an enemy, who cannot be a friend to himself?] In order, therefore, that there might be a distinction between those who choose good and those who choose evil, God has concealed that which is profitable to men [, i.e., the possession of the kingdom of heaven, and has laid it up and hidden it as a secret treasure, so that no one can easily attain it by his own power or knowledge]. (CR, 267)²²⁵

Naturally, since the competing systems of belief provide no space for rational argumentation, they can only operate along the coordinates of credulity and credibility. In the later chapters of book 3 of the *Recognitions of Clement* the problem is solved as Peter lays out the concept of Christian love, which does not conceal its characteristics of commoditisation: those who love the possession of heavenly

passage from Graves's *White Goddess*, one of Gaddis's sources, sheds a rather pagan light on the incident, implying that both events are causally related; cf. Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 187.

²²⁵ The text in square brackets is omitted in *The Recognitions*.

kingdom love God before everything else (CR, 267-8); those who have no affection for God and let him not enlighten their mind are placed in darkness and cannot see any light (CR, 273). What Peter thereby presents is an exemplary demonstration of the *quid pro quo*-triad of religious devotion, Divine grace, and recognition.

Gaddis satirises this bargain in a discussion between the Christian composer Stanley and his friend Anselm about Voltaire, which contains, not quite incidentally, a further reference to the Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions*:

—but somewhere I came across some words of his, “If there were no God, it would be necessary to invent him” [...] even Voltaire could see that some transcendent judgement is necessary, because nothing is self-sufficient, even art, and when art isn’t an expression of something higher, when it isn’t invested [...], it breaks up into fragments that don’t have any meaning [...]

—You sound like Simon Magus, *invested*, for Christ sake, Anselm said, putting a dirty hand on Stanley’s shoulder. (TR, 617)

Anselm’s reply refers to a passage in the *Recognitions* where Simon’s followers are offered “to be invested with the highest honours” and “believed by men to be gods” (CR, 197) if they help him in satisfying his desire to be with the woman Luna. Anselm declares Stanley’s investment-gain analogy as “heretic” (TR, 617) since it is for him nothing else but an attempted acquisition of spiritual consolation. The allegation appears less paradoxical when one bears in mind that the text by Pseudo-Clemente already depicts not only the namesake of Simony but also Clement’s less pious intention to bribe a magician in order to test the immortality of his own soul. Such examples, I think, are employed in order to suggest that refusing to bear existential uncertainty and succumbing to soteriological ‘commodity fetishism’ as an ‘easy way out’ amounts to a Faustian bargain. The acquisition of a *certitudo salutis* means to forfeit one’s soul and is no less ‘vulgar’ and illusory than the bargains offered by Simon Magus or Mephistopheles. As the epigraph of the novel’s epilogue describing the breakdown of Stanley’s investment fiendishly states: “Aux Clients Reconnus Maladies l’ARGENT ne sera pas Remboursé—Notices posted in brothels, Rue de l’Aqueduct, Oran” (TR, 901).²²⁶

²²⁶ Similarly, Gaddis introduces the last chapter of the Goethean parody (II, 8), with some lines from the medieval Chester play *The Harrowing of Hell*, in which the Edenic *hortus conclusus* is less exclusive as Adam would like to think (TR, 647).

4. Contemporaries

A lot of moderns make sudden changes dictated by the total uncertainty of what they're doing, which they call inspiration
—William Gaddis, *The Recognitions*²²⁷

In a letter to J. Robert Oppenheimer Gaddis expressed the thought that his novel was about “the massive character of the dissolution and corruption of authority, in belief, in ritual and in temporal order...”, about our histories and traditions as “both bonds and barriers among us”, and our art, which “brings us together and sets us apart”.²²⁸ In the following I will first elucidate this notion of art, relating it to the aesthetics of Gaddis and his contemporaries. Art, one might say, is a bridge for Gaddis, whose protagonist does not incidentally design bridges for a living. The symbol of connection, a literary trope so vividly expressed in Hart Crane’s *The Bridge*, however, is fractured in *The Recognitions*. When Wyatt and his wife discuss one of the bridges his company designed, ironically a “road bridge at Fallen Ark Gap”, he quotes a saying: “The arch never sleeps” (TR, 96). Steven Moore has identified Gaddis’s source for this saying and its context, J. R. Ackerley’s *Hindoo Holiday*:

The Hindoo never builds an arch; he prefers the rectangular form, the straight stone beam resting on uprights; for then there is pressure in only one direction, downwards.²²⁹

If one takes seriously what is not said in Ackerley’s lines, one gains an idea what the arch means for Wyatt, and eventually for Gaddis. There is pressure in the arch in more than one direction, not only downwards but also upwards, and strictly speaking also sideward, as if it simultaneously pushed away what it connects. It thereby establishes connection as well as separation. As Heidegger writes in “Building, Dwelling, Thinking”:

The banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream. The bridge designedly causes them to lie across from each other. One side is set off against the other by the bridge.²³⁰

²²⁷ Gaddis, *The Recognitions*, 234.

²²⁸ Cited in Crystal Alberts, “Mapping William Gaddis: The Man, *The Recognitions*, and His Time”, in *William Gaddis, ‘The Last of Something’: Critical Essays*, ed. Crystal Alberts et al. (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2010), 19.

²²⁹ Cited in Steven Moore, *The Gaddis Annotations Project*. <http://www.williamgaddis.org>; see Joseph Slade’s comparison of Crane’s bridge with the parabola imagery in Pynchon. Joseph W. Slade, *Thomas Pynchon* (New York: Warner Paperback, 1974), 244.

But in setting things off against each other, the bridge, as Heidegger continues, also gathers the earth as landscape; it creates locations; it lets things appear within what is present.²³¹

Related to this notion is a communal model of art production central to Gaddis's own way of working. This notion, directly opposed to that of the individualist artist, is that of the "self who... can do more" (TR, 253). This 'self', the notion of which was inspired by a verse by *Michelangelo*, represents, as Vanwesenbeeck argues, "an enlarged subjectivity that, like the multitudinous self of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855), [...] engages with its artistic others".²³² As Joseph Tabbi points out in his afterword to *Agapē Agape*, this

capacity for imaginative projection into the lifeworld, thought, and language of another person, whether living or dead, through music, literature, the visual arts, or conversation—this is the ethical burden of agapē in the arts.²³³

Gaddis expressed in "The Secret History of the Player Piano" that he saw such potentials radically undercut in an environment dominated by "entertainment and technology" (AA, 4), where everybody could be his or her own 'artist' by consuming prefabricated artistic expressions, as epitomised in the player piano. As a wonderful fictive dialogue between Huizinga and Benjamin in *Agapē Agape* shows (AA, 25), the question is not about the aura of an artwork. It is, as the narrator laments, about

the heart of it, where the individual is lost, the unique is lost, where authenticity is lost[;] not just authenticity but the whole concept of authenticity, that love for the beautiful creation before it's created. (AA, 26)

Gaddis therefore presents the player not merely as a reproduction machine depriving music of a sort of magical touch. He locates it in a series of specific processes taking place between 1880 and 1930, all aimed at the "elimination of failure through analysis, measurement, and prediction".²³⁴ The instrument, in his view,

²³⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 152.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 152-154, 159.

²³² Vanwesenbeeck, "Agapē Agape", 99.

²³³ Tabbi, "Afterword to *Agapē Agape*", AA, 77.

²³⁴ William Gaddis, Summary Notes on "The Secret History of the Player Piano", AA, 243. I discuss Benjamin's concept of 'aura' later in more detail.

emerged as a distillation of the goals that had surrounded its gestation in an orgy of fragmented talents seeking after the useful, Rockefeller organizing his world as Darwin the last one and Mrs. Eddy the next, Pullman organizing people and Spies labor, Eastman and McCormick patents and parts, Woolworth cash and Morgan credit, Frick power with his own property and Insull with other people's, Gibbs physics, Comstock vice, and Hollerith the census, while Spencer programmed ethics and Freud the psyche, Taylor work, Dewey facts, James things, Mendel, Correns, Tschermak and De Vries [...] heredity, a frenzied search for just those patterns in communication and control.²³⁵

The motivation for this search aimed at organisation and the elimination of chance and failure, according to the narrator of *Agapē Agape*, is so frenzied “because we’ve always hated failure in America” (AA, 11):

that’s what America was all about, what mechanization was all about, what democracy was all about and deification of democracy a hundred years ago and this technology at the service of entertaining Sigi’s stupefied pleasure seeking trash [...] (AA, 5)

Questions of mock snobbism aside, the reference to Freud’s pleasure principle, a mechanism that enables Gaddis to present the nascent American technocracy along the lines of Plato’s Republic and Bentham’s utilitarianism, does ironically expose that art, in such a model, becomes a paradigmatic expression of concerns about control and conformity. Thus, it is not only possible for the narrator to state that the player piano “came into being from some Civil War battlefield like Christ” (AA, 5-6).²³⁶ He can also detect aspects of a Faustian bargain in the American culture industry, to borrow Adorno’s term:

this romantic illusion of participating, playing Beethoven yourself that was being destroyed by the technology that had made it possible in the first place, the mechanization exploding everywhere and the phantom hands the, Kannst du mich mit Genuss betrügen yes that, If I every say to the moment don’t go! Verweile doch! Du bist so schön! No match for the march of science that made it possible [...] (AA, 13-4)

²³⁵ William Gaddis, “The Secret History of the Player Piano”, AA, 113.

²³⁶ McTammany, inventor of the player piano, allegedly conceived the idea for the instrument in the civil war (cf. AA 250). This enables Gaddis to draw parallels to the political ascent of Christianity. Constantine, the first Christian Emperor, had made Christianity a state religion under pressure from his army that eagerly responded to its soteriological promises (cf. Graves, *The White Goddess*, 415).

This thematic strand converges with the other extreme against which Gaddis writes. Like Goethe (or Thomas Bernhard, for that matter), he does not advocate artistic originality for its own sake, and like Goethe, who saw in Lord Byron a liberal anarchical individualist but also an ideological representative of the nascent capitalist era (“*Much money and no authority*”),²³⁷ Gaddis points to the downside of the romantic personality cult. For him, the culture industry turns the artist “into a performer, into a celebrity like Byron, the man in the place of the work” (AA, 4). These two factors, as I will demonstrate later in more detail, technique and the creation of aura through public relations, play also a crucial part in Wyatt’s forgeries:

Tragedy was foresworn, in a ritual denial of the ripe knowledge that we are drawing away from one another, that we share only one fear, share the fear of belonging to another, or to other, or to God; love or money, tender equated in advertising and the world, where only money is currency [...] (TR, 103)

Since *The Recognitions* not merely detects these factors in post-World-War II movements such as Abstract Expressionism but also quite harshly mocks the latter for their alleged isolation from the social sphere (in analogy to *Doctor Faustus*), it makes sense to provide a brief sketch of the cultural background of the novel.

When Gaddis returned from his travels through Europe and Latin America in 1952, he noticed that America had become the political and cultural centre of the world, that it “*was the world*”.²³⁸ He must have sensed, like many others, what the Spanish artist and writer Jorge Oteiza, in his “Letter to the Artists of America” had stated in 1945:

We find ourselves in an incomparable situation, full of hope for a grand creative ideal, a situation that could be compared only with those moments in which the Gothic world or the world of the Renaissance were about to begin. More than a mission of commentators, ours is a vocation of new and extraordinary actions.²³⁹

The task Oteiza bestows on the artist in such a situation is as follows:

The social importance of the artist resides in the extent to which he is a creator of myth, or, if he is engaged in the reproduction of them, the conditions under which he sets out to realize them.

²³⁷ Lukács, *Goethe and His Age*, 188-89.

²³⁸ Koenig, “The Writing of *The Recognitions*”, 24.

²³⁹ Jorge Oteiza, “Letter to the Artists of America”, in *Oteiza’s Selected Writings*, ed. Joseba Zulaika, trans. Frederick Fornoff (Reno, Nevada: University of Nevada, 2003), 92.

Myth is an invention of art in an act of social projection onto nations. It is an image of a world and a historical guide to a society. It is fable, religious necessities projected into the spatial and action geometries of the artist [...]²⁴⁰

Myth is for Oteiza “a kind of spiritual redemption created by society”, and the artist’s duty in problematic times is to “assume the mission of creating myths and an even more effective and profound way of utilizing them”.²⁴¹ Oteiza’s request to the artists of America here intersects with Gaddis’s opinion on the individualism and the ‘make it new’ aesthetic pervasive at the centre of American art production. In a 1949 letter written in Sevilla, Gaddis states:

The US myth(lesness) leaves no place for going backwards; unlike such a country, which has taken refuge in its (RCCH [Roman Catholic Church]) myth & myth-history (Philip II y antes), has no forward looking; US still trying to prove its legitimacy; here dead past is lived in as valid.²⁴²

Although his analysis of the “US myth(lesness)” is not exactly detailed, Gaddis has a point in stressing that there seemed no place for going backwards in America. One reason for this, as one of his characters holds, is that “[t]here is no place for history to accumulate” (TR, 655). The ‘young’ nation’s eagerness to demonstrate its political and cultural legitimacy here converged with a renewed emphasis on expansionism and unconditional individualism. While the terror of the past provided the fiercest apology for such rationales in political and economic terms, it fostered in cultural terms a withdrawal into subjectivist seclusion, in which everyone and everything exists in “its own vain shell” (TR, 690). In contrast, Gaddis capitalised on insisting on the bygone and supplementing historical and mythical perspectives to the flatness of the cultural ‘New Eden’ that had, in his view, “turned into a counterfeit of itself”.²⁴³

Gaddis frankly stated that he saw many of these factors embodied in Abstract Expressionism. It is unclear to what extent he had immersed himself in theories about contemporary American art, but as a professional fact checker, manic collector of newspaper clippings, and Village resident he must have been aware of individual

²⁴⁰ Oteiza, “Letter to the Artists of America”, 86.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 94. Oteiza’s demand reflects Blumenberg’s argument that ages “characterized by high rates of change of their system-conditions [are] eager for new myths, remythicizations, but also ill adapted for giving themselves what they desire” (*Work on Myth*, 34).

²⁴² Cited in Alberts, “Mapping William Gaddis”, 20.

²⁴³ Cited in Koenig, *Splinters*, 11.

trends and certainly also the intimate connections between “the *nouveaux riches* and a blossoming American avant-garde”.²⁴⁴ It is, however, doubtful, as I would argue, that he saw the American artist merely at one crossroads, forced to choose between the marketplace or the ivory tower,²⁴⁵ especially since the Abstract Expressionists also stood for an aesthetics and ideology diametrically opposed to that venerated by Gaddis. The latter made no secret of considering most of contemporary art production along the lines of Bernard Berenson’s *Aesthetics and History* (1948).²⁴⁶ As Berenson wrote:

Nowadays we are in the midst of a decline which, like all cultural declines, ignores its symptoms and euphorically images that it is revolutionizing the world when it is merely playing the infant, [...] daubing and kneading with paint and clay.²⁴⁷

Such aversion, as indicated, exceeds the domain of aesthetics, but also touches upon religious, epistemological, and mythopoeic matters. In 1945 Barnett Newman saw the shifting mode of painting as a response to the war: “Hiroshima showed it to us. We are no longer then in the face of a mystery. [...] The terror has indeed become as real as life”.²⁴⁸ Three years later, in his essay “The Sublime is Now”, Newman addressed the problem again: “if we are living in a time without a legend or mythos that can be called sublime, if we refuse to admit any exaltation in pure relations, if we refuse to live in the abstract, how can we be creating sublime art?”.²⁴⁹ As part of their solution to this question, painters such as Newman and Rothko, let themselves inspire by Aeschylus, for instance, or Jewish Mysticism.²⁵⁰ This preoccupation, not exclusively

²⁴⁴ Lisa Siraganian, “‘A disciplined nostalgia’: Gaddis and the Modern Art Object”, in *William Gaddis, ‘The Last of Something’: Critical Essays*, ed. Crystal Alberts et al. (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2010), 109.

²⁴⁵ Frederick R. Karl, “Gaddis: A Tribune of the Fifties”, in *In Recognition of William Gaddis*, ed. John Kuehl and Steven Moore (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1984), 179.

²⁴⁶ Christopher Knight provides a brief description of Gaddis and the art scene in the Village, especially the ‘tyranny’ of abstract expressionism in *Hints and Guesses: William Gaddis’s Fiction of Longing* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 34-35.

²⁴⁷ Bernard Berenson, *Aesthetics and History* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1954), 270; cf. Christopher Knight, “Flemish Art and Wyatt’s Quest for Redemption in William Gaddis’ *The Recognitions*”, in *In Recognition of William Gaddis*, ed. John Kuehl and Steven Moore (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1984), 59.

²⁴⁸ Charles Harrison, “Abstract Expressionism”, in *Concepts of Modern Art: From Fauvism to Postmodernism*, ed. Nikos Stangos (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 177, 191.

²⁴⁹ Cited in Harrison, “Abstract Expressionism”, 201. The terror he writes about indeed reverberates in *The Recognitions* when the poet Esme reiterates a line from Rilke’s first Duino Elegy: “for Beauty’s nothing/ but the beginning of Terror we’re just able to bear” (TR, 277).

²⁵⁰ Harrison, “Abstract Expressionism”, 191.

caused by the terror and ‘demystification’ experienced in the Second World-War but also by a revived interest in religion, is summarised by Harold Rosenberg in “The American Action Painters” (1952):

Based on the phenomenon of conversion the new movement is, with the majority of the painters, essentially a religious movement. In almost every case, however, the conversion has been experienced in secular terms. The result has been the creation of private myths.²⁵¹

These private myths, rather than being collective vehicles, stand in an individual relation to artist and spectator. Rosenberg, again, formulates the extreme point of the latter: “The big moment came when it was decided to paint just TO PAINT. The gesture on the canvas was a gesture of liberation, from Value – political, aesthetic, moral.”²⁵² The rhetoric of liberation circulating around Rosenberg’s apotheosis, even if seen as a prerequisite for new conceptions of art in hindsight (Warhol’s Brillo box was made in 1964), provoked many harsh responses. At the same time, however, Abstract Expressionism did not follow a fully contingent or infantile aesthetics, nor was it entirely apolitical. The biographies of painters such as Rothko alone indicate how these artists struggled to overcome traumas, and their relations to the so-called “new humanism” testify to their concerns,²⁵³ while their interest in mythology expresses a wide-ranging engagement with the question of how to avert the dead end of conceptual art. In defence of these ‘private myths’, Nancy Jachec argues that when people lose the “self-consciousness traditionally embedded in myth, the result is an amoral technocracy”.²⁵⁴ However, her almost homeopathic notion of myth, I think, is problematic since it tends to neglect the fact that such ‘private’, free-floating approaches, as opposed to socio-political modulations, are always in danger of serving a *Biedermeier* mentality. *The Recognitions* certainly does not hold fire in this respect, both as regards artistic ivory towers and art as a means of consolation. Significant in terms of the latter is Gaddis’s employment of Huizinga.

²⁵¹ Cited in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds. *Art in Theory, 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 583. As Knight notes, Newman “claimed that the Expressionists were jettisoning ‘outmoded’ myths and religions, and replacing them with the cathedrals of their own feelings” (*Hints and Guesses*, 48).

²⁵² Cited in Harrison and Wood, *Art in Theory*, 583.

²⁵³ Nancy Jachec, *The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism, 1940-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 168.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 100; see also Fredric Jameson’s criticism of Andy Warhol’s ‘non-communicative’ art in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 8-10.

5. *Horror Vacui*: Johan Huizinga and William Gaddis

Gaddis uses the Dutch historian's *Study of Forms of Life, Thought, and Art in France and the Netherlands* in the fourteenth and fifteenth century firstly to force a connection between two historic periods, the nascent Renaissance and America's ascent as the dominant Western power. In doing so he evokes an atmosphere of shock and perceived dissolution but also suggests parallels with the economic and ideological mechanisms Huizinga identifies at the cradle of modern history. Since both aspects are crucial for understanding Wyatt's devilish bargain, yet hardly given sufficient critical attention, I will provide a brief overview before discussing the Faustian core of *The Recognitions*.

Huizinga lays the ground for his account by emphasising the violent tenor of life and an immense "contrast between suffering and joy, between adversity and happiness" in waning Middle Ages.²⁵⁵ The resulting need to overcome such a discrepancy finds expression in three main routes: (1.) forsaking the world, (2.) an amelioration of the world itself, not as continual reform but in the form of individual salvation, and (3.) dreams, ideals and illusions (WMA, 36). Huizinga focuses on three manifestations closely related to the latter: chivalry, religion, and art.

Although the concept of chivalry is virtually irrelevant for a treatment of society in *The Recognitions*, it plays a considerable role in Wyatt and Stanley's notions of integrity and honour as associated with art. In Wyatt's case, the honourable and good, which Huizinga traces back to the *kalokagathia* of the Hellenes (WMA, 75), manifests itself via his obsession with the Guild of painters in Flanders (TR, 250) and the purity, honesty and righteousness he sees in their oath. Stanley, on the other hand, when he elaborates on his belief that there is "a moment when love and necessity become the same thing" (TR, 465), reiterates Huizinga's line: "[t]o formalize love is, moreover, a social necessity, a need that is the more imperious as life is more ferocious. Love has to be elevated to the height of a rite" (WMA, 105). Gaddis, following Huizinga, however, does more than imply that chivalry clashes with "the reality of things" (WMA, 65). Although it is a source of energy, it is also "a cloak for a whole world of violence and self-interest" (WMA, 75), and that honour is as egotistic. Most strikingly, Huizinga considers the illusion of chivalry as directly

²⁵⁵ Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages: A Study of the Forms of Life, Thought, and Art in France and the Netherlands in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries* (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 9 (hereafter cited in text as WMA).

influenced by what Miguel de Cervantes already ironically presents as dangerous: “life borrows motifs and forms from literature” (WMA, 76). One further formulation particularly strikes the reader: “In order to forget the painful imperfection of reality, the nobles turn to the continual illusion of a high and heroic life. They wear the mask of Lancelot and of Tristram” (WMA, 78). This masking, already existent in early Faustiana, has not only become central in texts such as O’Neill’s play *The Great God Brown* but plays a most crucial role in Pynchon’s *V.* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and not least in *The Recognitions*, where Wyatt, fully subscribing to the formula *larvatus prodeo*, hides behind an almost innumerable number of masks, from that of John Huss and Hugo van der Goes to the Flying Dutchman, Peer Gynt, and lastly Faust, in order to bear his life.

In terms of religion, Huizinga names two dominant factors: the extreme saturation of the religious atmosphere and a marked tendency of thought to embody itself in images (WMA, 147). Since all domains of life are saturated with religion to such an extent that one is in danger of losing sight of the distinction between spiritual and temporal things (WMA, 151), there is no object or action, “however trivial, that [is] not constantly correlated with Christ or salvation” (WMA, 147). The figure of Christ and the cross, and this thought was of interest for Gaddis, does not signify universal redemption but strengthens the suffering: “In early childhood the image of the cross was implanted on the sensitive heart, so grand and so forbidding as to overshadow all other affections by its gloom” (WMA, 185). The craving for salvation here meets the oppressive “insistence on psychic suffering: the mourning, the fear, the empty feeling of everlasting separation from God, the hatred of God, the envy of the bliss of the elect” (WMA, 209). Against such a background, every personal action is assessed by the individual for its soteriological value, every incident for its soteriological promise. Since man cannot measure the space between him and God, he fills in the void with symbols and objects promising relief: “However emphatically divines insisted upon the difference between sacraments and *sacramentalia*, the people would still confound them” (WMA, 148).²⁵⁶

As regards art, most of Huizinga’s arguments will be observed later in context. One needs to mention briefly, however, that art is characterised by the same tendency as

²⁵⁶ This notion is cognate with Weber’s observation in “The Intermediate Reflection” that art assumes the function of “innerworldly *salvation*: from the everyday and [...] also from the increasing pressure of theoretical and practical rationalism” (cited in Goldman, *Politics, Death, and the Devil*, 236).

religion, “to leave nothing without form, without figure, without ornament” (WMA, 237). In paintings, the “form develops at the expense of the idea, the ornament grows rank, hiding all the lines and all the surfaces. A *horror vacui* reigns, always a symptom of artistic decline” (WMA, 238); the “more crushing the misery of daily life, the stronger the stimulants that will be needed to produce that intoxication with beauty and delight without which life would be unbearable” (WMA, 239).²⁵⁷ This “art, which we admire”, Huizinga concludes almost complacently, “bloomed in the atmosphere of that aristocratic life, which repels us” (WMA, 247), and he then gives various accounts of base work undertaken by superior painters, including one about posters designed by Hugo van der Goes, “advertising a papal indulgence at Ghent” (WMA, 236).

²⁵⁷ This *horror vacui* is ironically reflected in the opening epigraph of *The Recognitions*. It is taken from Irenaeus’s second century tractate *Adversus Haereses*, but it is not unlikely that Gaddis adopted the quotation from Huizinga, where it occurs in the following variant: “*nihil vacuum neque sine signo apud Deum*” (WMA, 194-95; cf. Koenig, *Splinters*, 38-41). Huizinga writes about the pervasive symbolism in art of the Early Renaissance: “Here, then, is the psychological foundation from which symbolism arises. In God nothing is empty of sense: *nihil vacuum neque sine signo apud Deum* said Saint Irenaeus. So the conviction of a transcendental [sic] meaning in all things seeks to formulate itself. About the figure of the Divinity a majestic system of correlated figures, which all have reference to Him, because all things derive their meaning from Him. The world unfolds itself like a vast whole of symbols, like a cathedral of ideas. It is the most richly rhythmical conception of the world, a polyphonous expression of eternal harmony” (WMA, 194-95).

Chapter 4: Culture as Bargain: Art, Society, and Alienation in *The Recognitions*

1. Artist as Faust

The art has no enemies except the ignorant
—Arnold of Villanova²⁵⁸

There are copious connections between the Faust myth and art.²⁵⁹ The scope of texts depicting Faustian artists comprises Lenau, Hawthorne, Wilde, Corelli, Klaus and Mann, Mikhlail Bulgakov, and many more. In general, Faust, even when he is not engaged in the ‘holy art’ of alchemy, is a creator, a modeller. His translation of John 1.1, for instance, reflects a reinterpretation of God’s word as verbal performance but also transfers biblical authority into the human realm. As regards the moral evaluation of Faust’s creativity, Gaddis’s literary predecessors almost invariably condemn the doctor: trying to forge a world he undoes himself. Pseudo-Clemente ruthlessly humiliates the shape-shifting Simon; Marlowe’s self-fashioner meets his peril, be he a tragic hero or not; Lenau’s Faust-cum-painter commits suicide, unable to differentiate between fantasy and reality: “I am a dream with pleasure and guilt and pain/ and dream a knife into my heart.”²⁶⁰ The exploding avatar of Helen incapacitates Goethe’s striving doctor, and his son Euphorion, homage to Lord Byron and the personification of creativity, is not allowed to survive. Marie Corelli’s *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895) describes the rise and downfall of the writer Geoffrey Tempest. Klaus Mann’s Mephistophelian comment on his brother-in-law Gustav Gründgens leaves the Nazi collaborator crying: “Why do they pursue me? Why are they so hard? All I am is a perfectly ordinary actor...”²⁶¹

The most obvious candidate for a comparison with *The Recognitions* is of course Mann’s *Doctor Faustus*, Mann’s Faustian parable about the devils of Nazism. Although it has hitherto not been secured to which extent Gaddis had been aware of Mann’s text,²⁶² there are extensive formal and thematic parallels between the two novels. Since Brownson and Heffernan have already pointed to some intersections, I

²⁵⁸ Cited in Jung, C. G. *Psychology and Alchemy*, second edition (London: Routledge, 2008), 316.

²⁵⁹ For a brief account of Faustian artists see Goetsch, *Machtphantasien*, 215-37.

²⁶⁰ Lenau, *Faust*, 128 (my translation).

²⁶¹ Klaus Mann, *Mephisto*, trans. Robin Smith (London: Penguin, 1995), 263.

²⁶² The émigré had begun writing his *Zeitroman* in California in 1943, the English translation of which was available in by 1948. Mann, who inaugurated his lectureship in Princeton with a lecture on Faust, and who was widely present in public, cannot have eluded the attention of Gaddis. Moreover, several of Mann’s works were in the latter’s possession, for instance *The Magic Mountain* in a 1927 edition (see *Gaddis Working Library*, entries 766-9). *Doctor Faustus*, however, is not contained in Gaddis’s working library, and the author himself remained silent about whether he had read it.

restrict myself here to a brief discussion, while pointing in my later analyses to further relations in more detail. Both novels show a pastiche style and both embark on a mythopoeic tour de force, comprising a range of myths and fairy tales about souls lost and gained, for instance Hans Christian Anderson's tale of the mermaid (DF, 246, 396-7; TR, 346, 359).²⁶³ Both share 'stock themes' of Faustiana, such as references to hermetic philosophy and alchemy, and both copiously employ previous versions of the myth. While Gaddis mainly draws from Goethe, Marlowe, and Pseudo-Clemente, Mann's main literary reference point is the *Historia*, which he employs to give his narration a distinctly Lutheran tenor. Furthermore, both show influences from Nietzsche and Spengler, and both feature extensive discussions about art, society and religion.²⁶⁴ As regards the latter, both embed the story of their protagonists in a wider social context, combining *Künstlerroman* and *Zeitroman*. Parallelising the vita of the transgressive composer-cum-Nietzsche figure Adrian Leverkühn with the political events in Germany before and during World War II, Mann presents fascism as the transcendence of bourgeois life as a Dionysian intensification of the self to superhuman power that ends in collapse and subjugation.²⁶⁵ One finds a similar suggestion of interrelated alienation in Gaddis's novel in that society and artist are presented in a *pars pro toto* relation, mutually signifying and determining each other.

The most substantial parallels, however, are between both artist's sense of religious and artistic redemption. Both become artists disconnected with contemporary culture and art production, and both enter a Faustian wager. Mann's composer suffers from

²⁶³ Jameson calls *Doctor Faustus* the 'first' postmodern novel because of its use of pastiche (*Postmodernism*, 16).

²⁶⁴ Some statements about culture in *The Recognitions* show parallels to Spengler as depicted in Mann's novel. Mann drew explicitly from the philosopher, albeit very critically. The narrator of *Doctor Faustus*, Serenus Zeitblom, betrays a serious contempt for the "malicious conservatism" (DF, 297) of the "polyhistor" and "philosopher of culture" Chaim Braisacher (read Oswald Spengler), whose opinions "were directed against insofar as he affected to see all of history as nothing but a process of decline" (DF, 295). Braisacher, who declares everything in the contemporary world worthless as compared to primitive cultures, who were close to God, jeers, like Wyatt, "at painting's progress from the flat two-dimensional representation to perspective" (DF, 295). And like Braisacher, Wyatt is in danger of falling prey to the same "anti-humanity" (DF, 300) the conservative represents for Zeitblom.

²⁶⁵ See T. J. Reed, *Thomas Mann: The Uses of Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 364-65. Adrian, in Mann's political allegory, has himself deliberately infected with syphilis in order to attain a heightened state of mind that ends in catatonia after a soaring career. Mann here models Adrian along the biography of Nietzsche, whom he considered a "Luciferian genius, stimulated by disease" (Goldman, *Politics, Death, and the Devil*, 245). *The Recognitions* also features copious references to syphilis, for instance: "five centuries ago the English, Italians, and even Turks, readily acknowledged that civilization had been enhanced with syphilis by the French" (TR, 939, cf. 206, 848). The most striking resonance of this is the character Esme (inspired by Sheri Martinelli), a Gretchen-derivative who is sent to Wyatt by Brown as a model-cum-playmate. In Mann, the prostitute infecting Leverkühn is named *Haetera Esmeralda* in allusion to the mimetic capabilities of a butterfly (DF, 17).

the impossibility of artistic innovation and turns to the ‘devil’ in order to overcome the doldrums of music.²⁶⁶ Wyatt, on the other hand, turns to the devils of materialism in order to achieve an imagined restoration of a lost model of Christian communal art production.²⁶⁷ Wyatt and Leverkühn are exposed to religious extremes in their formative years, Protestantism on the one hand and occult religion on the other (DF, 10, 16). As much as Leverkühn’s “creative talents are inhibited by his ability to ‘see through’ everything”,²⁶⁸ suffering from “the cursed proclivity to see things in light of their own parody” (DF, 144), Wyatt is coloured by an immense cynicism motivated by the same ability. While Adrian’s career starts with parody, he seeks genuine musical expression, which he considers possible only in renewed ties of music to a community and from a sense of service, or vocation. As Harvey Goldman notes:

Adrian’s response to the dilemma of culture is a complex fantasy of redemption, expressed in the language of service. The first dimension of the fantasy is embodied in his desire [...] for an imagined community of the future to redeem art (and thus himself) from its isolation and lack of validation: he proposes that art abandon its present autonomy and grandiosity and return to a ‘more modest, happier [role] in the service of a higher union,’ which would eliminate the “idea of culture” [...]. Though much of the avant-garde imagined the salvation of self and society through art, Adrian sees art not only as a ‘means of salvation’ but also in need of salvation itself [...]²⁶⁹

²⁶⁶ Mann’s cooperation with Adorno for the musicological debate is well known. The devil, with whom Leverkühn debates, is a spokesman of what Adorno laid out in his *Philosophy of Modern Music* (1949).

²⁶⁷ Like Mann’s, Gaddis’s protagonist is only partly modelled after Faust. Wyatt’s original, as it were, is the Dutch art forger Han van Meegeren, active between the 1920s and 1940s, who had failed as a painter before turning to forgery. After some badly reviewed exhibitions, van Meegeren forged a Vermeer, which was authenticated and sold to a prestigious gallery in Rotterdam. More ‘newly found’ masterpieces followed, one of which happened to be sold to the German Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring. Questioned by the Allied forces in 1945 about the sale, van Meegeren’s middleman betrayed the forger, who was arrested as a plunderer of Dutch cultural property and Nazi collaborator. It was still assumed that the painting sold to the Nazis was an original. Van Meegeren, a heavy drinker and addicted to sleeping pills, finally cracked under the pressure of imprisonment and confessed having painted the Vermeer himself. Ironically, his forgeries were more convincing than his claim, so he had to prove his mastery in the presence of experts and court-witnesses. Asked if he could copy a Vermeer from memory, van Meegeren is said to have exclaimed: “To paint a copy is no proof of artistic talent. In all my career I have never painted a copy! But I shall paint you a new Vermeer. I shall paint you a masterpiece”. Cited in Frank Wynne, *I Was Vermeer: The Legend of the Forger who Swindled the Nazis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 199. Having convinced the committee, the forger was released but soon convicted again for fraud; cf. Koenig (*Splinters*, 72) and Knight (*Hints and Guesses*, 72-6).

²⁶⁸ Goldman, *Politics, Death, and the Devil*, 226.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 237.

The very same coordinates, as I will demonstrate, also hold for Wyatt's endeavour to simultaneously redeem the perceived depravity of art and his own self.²⁷⁰ Like Adrian, who wants "to reduce music to the level it had once held within the worshipping community during what he considered a happier age" (DF, 91) at an early stage of his career, he proposes a return to a model community of artists in the service of God as represented by the Flemish Primitives. Paradoxically, both artists aspire to achieve their goals with the aid of the 'devil'. The pillars of society eroded, Leverkühn believes that only a pact with greater evil can win redemption, which is why he can consider himself akin to a criminal. Furthermore, as Goldman argues, Adrian's feeling of personal worthlessness and his estrangement from God "lead him to a redemptive 'pact' with the devil to realize [his] goals, free him from inhibition, and make possible his 'breakthrough'" to a new mode of musical composition.²⁷¹ While Wyatt is motivated by the same impulses, on the other hand, his 'pact' imposes severe restrictions onto him, as he chooses to work according to the aesthetic guidelines of the Guild of Flemish painters. Despite such superficial differences, however, both aesthetics are qualitatively similar. The two artists, despite their sense of depravity, elaborate in their 'pacts' a fiction of self-aggrandisement. A key factor here is the Weberian notion of 'calling'. As Goldman argues,

Doctor Faustus most fully reveals the ascetic ideal of the calling as a vehicle for redeeming the self through the acquisition of power, and how the search for power is related to a redemptive fantasy of belonging contained within it. The calling, that is, is the key to a redemptive project to empower the self while also winning it a form of social approval and connection, if only abstractly—through the substitution of an abstract ultimate ideal in place of a socially concrete one.²⁷²

It is exactly though his pact Adrian that remains within the orbit and dualisms of Christianity. There is also a strong correlation with *The Recognitions* here, which is unfortunately not discussed by Brownson or Heffernan. Adrian's power, as the agreement with the devil prescribes, gained from ascetic renunciation, is, as Goldman suggests, intimately related to Calvinistic and Puritan asceticism. This parallel is accentuated by his "rigid predestinationism", for "despite the explicit references to

²⁷⁰ See Gaddis (cited in Koenig, *Splinters*, 90): the "process of art is the artist's working out of his own redemption"; cf. also Knight, *Hints and Guesses*, 49.

²⁷¹ Goldman, *Politics, Death, and the Devil*, 226.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 262.

Adrian's Lutheranism, the novel portrays him more as a Calvinist than a Lutheran".²⁷³ As Adrian tells his friends and followers in his own version of the Lamentation of Doctor Faust:

long before I dandled with that poisonous moth, my soul, in its conceit and pride, was upon the road to Satan, [...] for as you must know, man is made and predestined for bliss or for hell, and I was born for hell. (DF, 523)

Eventually, it is Adrian's inability to "conceive of self and culture in terms other than the ones laid out in the dualisms of Christianity" that "condemns him to move in a circle from which there is no escape, despite the fantasy of breaking out".²⁷⁴ Similarly, Wyatt, like Edward Bast in *JR*, "labors under the never-waning pressure of a Protestant work aesth-ethic that he can't redeem".²⁷⁵ Thus, the lifestyle of both, composer and painter, is characterised by self-infringement and suffering. Forsaking love is a part of this bargain: while the Devil wants Adrian cold (DF, 264), Wyatt shows a consistent inability to love (a feature also reminiscent of Hawthorne's *Marble Faun*, in which artistic grandeur is achieved only at the cost of social alienation). In many respects Adrian's longing for meaning through service results in the confirmation of self-hatred in a fantasy bond with the devil. The same admixture of self-loathing and hubris is also in the background of Gaddis's novel. 'Service' here becomes a figure of self-abnegation but also self-legitimation through submission to a higher ideal. To subordinate the self to an object or ideal is not only to have one's tasks laid out and the parameters of perfection prefigured. It is in both cases a fiction that enables access to meaning which both artists cannot derive from themselves.²⁷⁶ Especially in the case of *The Recognitions*, this is an aspect that has been neglected in early discussions of Wyatt's craft. He does not copy but *create* in the manner of the Flemish Primitives, thereby attempting to recreate their entire life-world.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 247.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 250.

²⁷⁵ Vanwesenbeeck, "Agapē Agape", 90.

²⁷⁶ Here are strong relations to Puritan thinking. As Weber notes, in Puritanism, the true source of personality is "submission or devotion to the work or object as an ultimate value, coupled with systematic, rational effort in the calling to realize these values in the world" (Goldman, *Politics, Death, and the Devil*, 73). However, it is also significant that Weber only fully discovered the concept through the German situation in World War I (cf. *ibid.*, 66-67), where the meaninglessness of death and life as produced by rationalisation was charged with charisma through the empowering (fiction of a) struggle for a higher course, a thought that comes decidedly to the fore in Slothrop's quest through the Zone.

In parallel to this religious dialectic stands Adrian's compositional technique that, as Adorno and others have noted, suggests itself as a parable of fascism. Adrian's 'strict style' (dodecaphonic principle) exemplifies that "[f]reedom always has a propensity for dialectic reversal" (DF, 203). His "system of rational organization" (DF, 204) breaks through the exhausted possibilities of music, but it expels any element that does "not fulfill its thematic function within the overarching structure" (DF, 511). Although Leverkühn wants to resolve "music's magical essence into human reason" (DF, 207), he only achieves a system of dominance that transposes the latter into magical essence (DF, 208). The resulting number-game of serial music represents for Adorno "a closed system", in which the "configuration of means is directly hypostasized as goal and as law" that eventually "treats music according to the schema of fate, divesting itself of any implication of meaning present in the music object itself".²⁷⁷ What remains on formal grounds, then, is a totalitarian mechanism, in which the freedom of the individual element is sacrificed to the totality. The coldness of the system here correlates with that of Adrian, who eventually aspires to undo the humanistic message of Beethoven's Ninth symphony.²⁷⁸ In Wyatt's work ethic Gaddis addresses similar relations. While the specific emphasis he puts on the relations between religion, economy and power is less overtly political than Mann's or Pynchon's at the first glance, his depiction of Wyatt's New England hometown leaves no doubt that there is more than one common denominator between the ideal Puritan, Weber's money-grabbing entrepreneurs, and what Adorno and others called the 'authoritarian personality'. Furthermore, as I will argue later in more detail, Wyatt's notion of necessity in painting may be understood as a stance against the Greenwich Village narcissism, as Lisa Siraganian rightly points out, but it is also reminiscent of Adrian's strict style. What Wyatt learns from his teacher Koppel in Munich is that "when you paint you don't just paint, [...] you have to know that every line you put down couldn't go any other place, couldn't be any different" (TR,

²⁷⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster (London: Continuum, 2007) 47-48.

²⁷⁸ See Susan von Rohr Scaff, "Doctor Faustus", in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Mann*, ed. Ritchie Robertson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 182. See also Pynchon's satiric Beethoven-Rossini debate in *Gravity's Rainbow* (GR, 621-22) as discussed by Cowart (*Thomas Pynchon*, 88), Moore (*The Style of Connectedness*, 112, 281), and Steven Weisenburger, *A 'Gravity's Rainbow' Companion: Sources and Contexts for Pynchon's Novel*, 2nd ed. (Athens/ London: The University of Georgia Press, 2006), 24-49. The latter names Mann's *Doctor Faustus* as a possible inspiration in this context (*ibid.*, 246).

144).²⁷⁹ However much aimed against hubristic notions of romantic genius, his aesthetic thereby not only betrays an inhuman character (“All of our highest goals are inhuman ones”, *TR* 589) but also becomes oppressive for the artist, who is almost always on the verge of bursting under the burden of the order to which he subscribes.²⁸⁰ Wyatt lives up to Goethe’s dictum that all that is art and artificial “requires a closed space” (*TR*, 872; cf. *F*, 6684), which is one reason why he becomes a forger. As Gaddis notes:

[t]he tangible framework of forgery presents Wyatt a context for accomplishment, a tradition of delimited and delineated perfection in painting. Forgery makes him feel safe, and confident, and able to accomplish his work.²⁸¹

Yet, although he thrives in this tradition, filling the framework provided by it with the minutest details, “sometimes the accumulation”, as he laments, “is too much to bear” (*TR*, 113-14).

Against this background it does not make much sense to locate Wyatt solely in the “alienated genius” tradition. As Joseph Conway notes, “readers do Gaddis disservice when they take at face value Wyatt’s priestly pretensions, or make Gaddis himself

²⁷⁹ Gaddis’s handwritten marginalia in the manuscript of the second chapter of *The Recognitions*, omitted in the published version, indicate that he did not want Koppek to appear as a typical German; cf. Birger Vanwesenbeeck, “Art and Community in William Gaddis’s *The Recognitions*”, *Mosaic* 42, no. 3 (2009): 150-52. Knight relates this sense of necessity to Koppel’s dictum of knowing shapes “by heart” (*TR*, 89), of an aesthetic, as he argues, based on a “feeling” and an “internal sense” achieved through dedication to the discipline, conscious craftsmanship, and the painter’s willingness to “play the role of a medium” (*Hints and Guesses*, 38).

²⁸⁰ It would be too far-fetched to suggest that Wyatt is an authoritarian personality ‘proper’ since his stress on agapistic ethics eventually stand in contradiction to Fascist principles (although some of his personal predispositions are well within the so-called “F-scale”). Nevertheless does his reliance on religious authority and that of the Guild betray a more than rigid framework. Compare, for instance, Adorno, who writes that “[t]he aporia of art today is not to be cured through any willing subordination to authority. It remains an open question, just how, without coercion, it would be possible, given an unmitigated nominalism, to achieve anything on the order of objectivity of form; this is impeded by instituted closure. The tendency toward this instituted closure was synchronous with the rise of political fascism, whose ideology similarly feigned that a state freed from the desperation and insecurity of its subjects during the period of late liberalism could be hoped for only on the basis of the abdication of the subject. Of course, this abdication was prompted by more powerful subjects”. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2004), 220.

²⁸¹ Cited in Christopher J. Knight, “Trying to Make Negative Things Do the Work of Positives Ones: Gaddis and Apophaticism”, in *William Gaddis, ‘The Last of Something’: Critical Essays*, ed. Crystal Alberts *et al.* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2010), 55. Petrus van Ewijk reads this comment as follows: “Wyatt’s attraction to emulation originates from a desire to uncover and mentally inhabit a nicely delineated order in which he is able to feel safe from the despair he continuously feels” (“Life Must Be Led in the Dark”, 376).

into a figure martyred for the eternal sanctity of art”.²⁸² Following this suggestion, I will show how Gaddis’s Faustian painter works exactly with the very forces against which he purports to act. Unlike other Faustus, however, he eventually manages to free himself from both the Puritan and the devilish pact. Thus, while Adrian’s Icarus flight (DF, 530) ends in isolation and a death coloured by a “mystical notion of salvation” (DF, 532), Wyatt abandons his self-renunciation and sense of guilt and decides to live his sins “through” (TR, 896). The Weberian homunculus in the Iron Cage will learn to become a human being.

2. Manhattan Middle Ages: Socio-Cultural Exhaustion in Post-war America

Technology and comfort—having these, people speak of culture
—Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus*²⁸³

The Recognitions characterises contemporary life as debased and fallen. The imagery of pandemonium in the novel is indeed so consistent and overwhelming that one is inclined to believe the narrator when he indicates in a Wycliffite phrase that “[i]n this world God must serve the devil” (TR, 50). The pervasiveness of suffering and violence in the novel mocks any notion of theodicy. There is, it seems, nothing one can shore up against the horror of a world where people jump from the Empire State building by hundreds (TR, 945), where the ruins of Berlin are just as good as those of Rome (TR, 909), where individuals “with a fake concentration camp number tattooed” on their arms supervise “discussion[s] on Suffering” (TR, 943-44), where local Civil War monuments are “dwarfed in deference to greater wars” (TR, 391), and where the pursuit of happiness is identified as a “sublime delusion” (TR, 369).

As regards cultural activity, this America is flat, exhausted, fake. A distinctly modern space with no continuity outside the capitalist order, it is “a land where everything was calculated to wear out, made from design to substance with only its wearing out and replacement in view, and that replacement to be replaced” (TR, 310). But however the individual predispositions of ways to art are portrayed in *The Recognitions*, the primary constant is that socially ‘meaningful’ art has become impossible. An irreconcilable rift between artists, markets, and society is only bridged by the dollar. Caught between the poles of sanctimonious iconoclasm in New England

²⁸² Conway, “Failing criticism”, 85.

²⁸³ Mann, *Doctor Faustus*, 66.

and the all-devouring culture industry in New York, the “origins of design (TR, 98, 322) have become inaccessible. The ‘authentic’ art of the streets, the Graffiti folklore, so to speak, is only tangible in the borders, in minute fissures of the narration: “*Jesus was a communist; Hitler was right*” (TR, 341).²⁸⁴ *O tempora, o mores!* At a party in Brown’s gallery, a Royal Academy member cynically holds that paintings represent the spirit of the times, but the times are bad enough without these paintings (TR, 661). What is expressed here is the renunciation of authentic art: art as the mimesis of the hardened and alienated, scarred art, art that stresses the irreconcilable, suffering.²⁸⁵ Such suffering is substituted by capitalised Suffering, it is enrobed in the cloak of martyrdom or moral relativism.

Only a few characters are given a glimpse of creativity. Wyatt has a sort of epiphany when he sees Picasso’s ‘Night Fishing in Antibes’. Stanley is granted atonement when he dies in a collapsing church during the performance of his composition. One of the few artists whose work comes closest to common notions of ‘original’ production is Otto Pivner. Otto merely records what circulates in the discursive field, pieces of conversations he overhears, but his agents and reviewers refuse his play because some parts of it sound too “familiar” (TR, 296). Where the intellectual vacuum is filled with verbal commodities, mimetic art can only be plagiarism. Only the poet Esme, schizophrenic heroin addict and innocent Gretchen figure, manages to fade through the accumulated chaos into simplicity,

where nothing was created, where originality did not exist: because it was origin; where once she was there work and thought in causal and stumbling sequence did not exist, but only transcription [...] (TR, 299)

This participation in the realm of origin allows her literally to be the poem (TR, 300), to be song, simply to be, but the ironic feat involved in such an existence as *poeta vates* is that she (accidentally) ‘produces’ Rilke poems. ‘True’ art as a celebration of creation and communal participation is something impossible to locate in Gaddis’s

²⁸⁴ What comes to mind here is a part of the Khirgiz Light episode in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, in which the ‘magic’ of graffiti vents political discontent. Her, the Turkish Alphabet, formalised and codified by bureaucrats, is reclaimed by the local population: “On sidewalks and walls the very first printed slogans start to show up, the first Central Asian fuck you signs, the first kill-the-police-commissioner signs (and somebody does! this alphabet is really something!)” (GR, 355-56). For a detailed discussion see Moore, *The Style of Connectedness*, 99.

²⁸⁵ See Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 24-25, 28, 29.

Greenwich Village of the late forties. Such impossibility is elegantly expressed in Rilke's eighth Duino Elegy:

Always facing creation, we perceive there
Only a mirroring of the free and open,
Dimmed by our breath...

And we, spectators always, everywhere,
Looking at, never out of everything!
It fills us. We arrange it. It collapses.
We re-arrange it, and collapse ourselves.²⁸⁶

What remains, then, is reproduction, impersonation, and work for the industry, and especially as regards the avant-garde movements in the Village one suspects that any attempt to transgress the status quo of commoditised bourgeois art is always already in the service of the latter. This comes most explicitly to the fore in the work of Max Schling, one of the novel's most notorious artists, who seems to be a living exegesis of the 'mindless' kneading Bernard Berenson ascribed to the Abstract Expressionists. Although Max is said to be "good with composition", he "works like painting was having an orgasm" (TR, 184) or simply modifies some '*objects trouvés*', such as the workman's shirt he uses as the basis for his artistic pseudo-commentary on class antagonisms, the "Workman's Soul" (TR, 199), or even bits of paintings by established artists. For Max, the production of artworks is less the careful arranging of constellations that Wyatt is concerned with; it appears pragmatic, an almost visceral mechanism aimed at the sole purpose of artistic survival. Adorno pleads for an aesthetics of collage and the tracing of true art along the fractures of the individual fragments the artwork is made of.²⁸⁷ He writes that the "fragment is that part of the totality of a work that opposes totality", and he adds that one tendency of artworks is to "wrest themselves free of the internal unity of their own construction, to introduce within themselves caesuras".²⁸⁸ Times in which totality is no longer possible bring forth fragmented artworks. Max's art reflects this:

²⁸⁶ Cited in Ernest L. Stahl, *Creativity: A Theme from Faust and the 'Duino Elegies', An Inaugural Lecture Delivered before the University of Oxford on 2 March 1961* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 3.

²⁸⁷ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 29.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 51, 116.

—And these pictures he's showing now, the abstract paintings he's selling now, don't you know where he got them? [...] [T]hey're all fragments lifted right out of Constable canvases [...] (TR, 623)

Even if this primarily seems to mock Clement Greenberg's opinion that the "avant-garde, both child and negation of Romanticism, become the embodiment of art's instinct of self-preservation",²⁸⁹ it much rather demonstrates what Agamben describes as follows:

Alienating by force a fragment of the past from its historical context, the quotation at once makes it lose its character of authentic testimony and invests it with an alienating power that constitutes its unmistakable aggressive force.²⁹⁰

How then is the self-preservation of such art depicted? Although Max's work is rather ignored than admired, it is one of the few ones in *The Recognitions* that are spared destruction. On a further level, such survival is depicted in Max himself. Unlike Stanley or Wyatt, he is an artist without a sustaining ideological framework. He just gaily lifts from others and successfully sells. For him, as for so many other characters, "[a]rt is a work of necessity" (TR, 465), but refraining from specifying what kind of necessity he is referring to, he merely provides what seems to be expected in conversations about his work. The artwork's 'truth content' and the message it conveys are effects created by its title and by discourse about it. Accordingly, one of his companions explains what is so admirably despicable about Max's art: "I hate him, Otto said, [...] because he'll survive" (TR, 466-67). Gaddis presents such artistic survival in the literal sense. While Stanley is buried under a church that collapses during the performance of his work, Wyatt ceases to be an artist in the common sense, and so does Otto. The last thing one reads about Max, however, is that he lives in the Parisian Banlieu and "paints pictures for a well-known painter who signs them and sells them as originals" (TR, 944). He has settled down and undertaken a decisive turn in his career, for his habitual plagiarism has become an institutionalised plagiarism for another artist: surviving art is alienated art.

²⁸⁹ Greenberg, Clement "Towards a Newer Laocoon", cited in Harrison and Wood, *Art in Theory*, 556. *Constable* refers to the romantic painter John Constable (cf. TR 185).

²⁹⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *The Man without Content*, trans. Georgia Albert (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 104.

Such diminishing expectations were to remain a stock device in Gaddis's novels, for instance in *J R* where Edward Bast's attempt to compose a masterwork is constantly undermined by material demands, so that he starts composing "nothing music" (JR, 112) and "Zebra music" (JR, 202) for a living, only to end up writing a piece for unaccompanied cello with a piece of crayon. They are, however, not Gaddis's alone. The trope of exhaustion and finitude is itself inexhaustible, as can be seen in the strongest correlative to Gaddis's Greenwich Village, the group of loafers and artists known as the Whole Sick Crew in Pynchon's *V*.²⁹¹ Here, Dudley Eigenvalue, "[p]atron of the arts, discreet physician to the neo-Jacobean school", muses about the group's decadence:

But they produced nothing but talk and at that not very good talk. A few like Slab actually did what they professed; turned out a tangible product. But again, what? Cheese Danishes. Or this technique for the sake of technique—Catatonic Expressionism. Or parodies on what someone else had already done.²⁹²

For Pynchon, just like Gaddis, parody and impersonation are signs of cultural exhaustion:

"Mathematically, boy," he [Eigenvalue] told himself, "if nobody else original comes along, they're bound to run out of arrangements someday. What then?" What indeed. This sort of arranging and rearranging was Decadence, but the exhaustion of all possible permutations and combinations was death. (*V.*, 298)

Accordingly, the work of the Catatonic Expressionist Slab is "the ultimate in non-communication" (*V.*, 56). Nothing can be communicated because both content and mode of communication have emptied themselves. All that is left is technique and parody, which are both, in turn, bound to deplete. The Crew, as the *Eulenspiegel* character Rachel Owlglass accuses them, "does not live, it experiences. It does not create, it talks about people who do. Varèse, Ionesco, de Kooning, Wittgenstein, I could puke. It satirizes itself and doesn't mean it" (*V.*, 380).²⁹³

²⁹¹ Julián Jiménez Heffernan briefly compares Gaddis's and Pynchon's village bohemians in "Ironic Distance in Thomas Pynchon's 'Entropy'" *Contemporary Literature* 52, no. 2 (2011): 317; cf. David Seed, *The Fictional Labyrinths of Thomas Pynchon* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1988), 82.

²⁹² Thomas Pynchon, *V*. (London: Vintage: 2000), 297 (hereafter cited in text as *V.*).

²⁹³ Some ten years after the publication of *V.*, Richard Sennett gave a clinical description of the attitude of Gaddis and Pynchon's village 'phonies': "As a character disorder, narcissism is the very opposite of

If times of violent transition have the reputation of triggering artistic innovations, then the times depicted in *The Recognitions* are equally disreputable as those in *V.* Like Albrecht Dürer's Melancholy Angel, artistic activity is stranded in a land without wind, "left to look disconsolately at tools of cultural activity that have lost their shaping function".²⁹⁴ Most of the characters in the novel live from fragments they are helplessly trying to remould, as they are themselves lived fragments, be it the composer Stanley, the aspiring writer Otto, or the kitchen philosopher Anselm. The dissociated pieces of life cannot be glued together, except in the comic strips in the newspapers, "where life flowed in continuum" (TR, 288). In this respect Gaddis, like Pynchon, is also very close to Spengler, who states in *The Decline of the West* that when a "Civilization has worked itself out fully to the definitive form", this "betokens the end of the living development of the Culture and the exhaustion of the last potentialities of its significant existence" (DW, 2:48). Even more negatively biased are Spengler's notes to an unfinished artists' novel:

The comical novel; diabolical: as artistic work today is a lie. Everybody is a fool or someone who deceives himself. The grand nonsense of such a quixotism. Not chivalry dies here but art. The last legitimate successors of Dante, Bach and Rembrandt. The whole art business – once the profoundest expression of the ascending soul – is chatter today because the soul is dying. Depict remorselessly how people fabricate music and philosophy amidst the barbarism of the metropolis, behind doors, useless for the world. [...] Not *he* is incapable of doing something; there is nothing left to be capable of doing.²⁹⁵

The Recognitions contains similar implications. It is Paris, for instance, elsewhere in the novel portrayed as the epitome of fully actualised culture, which Wyatt perceives in the following way: "There was a pall on every face, a gathering of remnants of suspicion of the end, a melancholia of things completed" (TR, 69). Gaddis captures

strong self-love. Self-absorption does not produce gratification, it produces injury to the self; erasing the line between self and other means that nothing new, nothing "other," ever enters the self; it is devoured and transformed until one thinks one can see oneself in the other—and then it becomes meaningless. This is why the clinical profile of narcissism is not of a state of activity, but of a state of being. There are erased the demarcations, limits, and forms of time as well as relationship. The narcissist is not hungry for experiences, he is hungry for Experience. Looking always for an expression or reflection of himself in Experience, he devalues each particular interaction or scene, because it is never enough to encompass who he is. The myth of Narcissus neatly captures this: one drowns in the self—it is an entropic state". Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 324-25.

²⁹⁴ Leland De la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 50.

²⁹⁵ Cited in Merlio, "Die mythenlose Mythologie des Oswald Spengler", 207 (my translation).

the aporia in late 1940s art movements in similar terms when he has his protagonist confessing to the art dealer Reckfall Brown: “It’s as though...there’s no direction to act in now” (TR, 143). It is no accident that this magazine reviews Wyatt’s first forged Memling as a newly discovered original, for where the progression of the ‘real’ fails, the aporia of the fake prevails, becomes apotheosis. Simultaneously, as the ‘authentic’ is rejected and pushed to the fringes, another form assumes its place in the circuit: sacramental art, artefacts to which one attaches soteriological capacities, pseudo-religious fetishes engendering “fictions to get us safely through the night”, to use a phrase from Gaddis’s essay “Old Foes with New Faces” (AA, 189). Gaddis follows Spengler and Huizinga here: the acquisition of artworks has ceased to be of broader social import and merely signifies a philistine gesture of ascertaining individual consolation. We are not shown any barbarism to which such circumstances could be the response; we are only shown barbarism. Shock, bourgeois retreat, and the loss of absolutes in a universe whose centre does not hold any longer spur the peddling of *sacramentalia*.²⁹⁶

Rather than making such pacts with the forces of capitalism a simplistic allegory of a ‘sold soul’, however, Gaddis embeds them in a network of failed counter-cultural activities, as it were, and therefore complicates any notions of ideological dismantling or overcoming the logic of money. The character Agnes Deigh, for instance, realises the futility of redemptive hopes, famously expressed some ten years after the publication of *The Recognitions* by Marcuse: “We are the great refusal” (TR, 757). With *Great Refusal*, the phrase that influenced a generation of Americans and, ironically, had appeared long before in Dante Alighieri with entirely different connotations, Marcuse means “the protest against that which is” (ODM, 66).²⁹⁷ The role of artworks in times until the Renaissance, he asserts, was to posit an alternative realm. However, Marcuse laments that in modern times even “works of alienation are themselves incorporated [in modern times] into this society and circulate as part and parcel”; in short, “they become commercials” (ODM, 67). What originally pointed to the transcendence of life, art as a counterforce, is lost. Rather than being capable of signifying religious devotion, the artwork is used to express and shape consumerism;

²⁹⁶ To argue from an Adornian viewpoint one could say in this context that “[t]aste is the truest seismograph of historical experience”. Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London/ New York: Verso, 2005), 145.

²⁹⁷ Dante wrote the following lines in his *Inferno* about pope Celestine V.: “He who made by his cowardice the grand refusal” (*Inferno*, III, 60).

it is, as a spiritual commodity, “a dense encystation of needs, desires, fantasies; it is the matrix of all forms of social regulation”.²⁹⁸ Attempts to alienate oneself from the world as signified by religious masterpieces have been incorporated in *The Recognitions* as a reaffirmation of consumerism and imminence. It is Agnes Deigh who becomes an example of the impossibility of both refusal and escape. Her attempt to commit suicide fails wretchedly, and so does the symbolic import of her suicidal gesture; she, the *Agnus Dei*, cannot atone for others and be a model of redemption.²⁹⁹ In brief, Gaddis conveys a strong sense that the tools of cultural activity remain encystations of fantasies. As Adorno writes in his *Aesthetic Theory*:

As a result from its inevitable withdrawal from theology, from the unqualified claim to the truth of salvation, [...] art is condemned to provide the world as it exists with a consolation that [...] strengthens the spell of that from which the autonomy of art wants to free itself.³⁰⁰

Rather negative in this respect, *The Recognitions* does not even allow religion or religious art ‘proper’ to constitute a viable alternative. Exemplary in this respect is Stanley, whom Gaddis uses predominantly as a contrast figure for Wyatt and whose art perhaps best exemplifies how in Gaddis’s work “[e]very solution to the problem of order—be it aesthetic, philosophical, or theological—seems to carry within its own undoing”.³⁰¹ Stanley “gladly believes what Wyatt cannot accept: that he is the man for whom Christ died”.³⁰² With this he accepts a framework, faith and the Church, rejected by other artists. His palindrome, “Trade Ye No Moneyed Art” (TR, 177) is a textual spot of resistance against both cultural commodification and the “word of Satan, No, the Eternal No” (TR, 599). Eventually, it also serves him as an aid against the “modern disease”:

—That’s what it is, a disease, you can’t live like we do without catching it. Because we get time given to us in fragments, that’s the only way we know it. Finally we can’t even conceive of a continuum of time. Every fragment exists by itself, and that’s why we live among

²⁹⁸ Paul Mann, *Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 20-21.

²⁹⁹ In her letter she writes that we pay for “the mistakes of others” (TR, 556), alluding to Christian soteriology and a chapter of the same title in Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed*.

³⁰⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 2.

³⁰¹ Knight, *Hints and Guesses*, 5.

³⁰² Joseph S. Salemi, “To Soar in Atonement. Art as Expiation in Gaddis’ *The Recognitions*”, in *In Recognition of William Gaddis*, ed. John Kuehl and Steven Moore (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1984), 54.

palimpsests, because finally all the work should fit into one whole, and express an entire perfect action, as Aristotle says, and it's impossible now, it's impossible, because of the breakage, there are pieces everywhere... (TR, 615-16)

The disease he is referring to, the one Gaddis described in his letter to Oppenheimer, is entropy.³⁰³ As regards his everyday life, Stanley's fight takes on quixotic tones. Obsessed with a crack in the ceiling of his flat, permanently carrying a hammer and a chisel with him, avoiding underground travel (TR, 319), and being dominated by fantasies about his ill mother, he appears as a comic version of Roderick Usher. Yet his miserable life among palimpsests does not keep him from aspiring to spiritual oneness in the domain of art. Striving for perfection, Stanley tries to emulate composers such as Gabrieli and Corelli, who, according to him, "touched the origins of design with recognition" (TR, 322). Not unlike Wyatt, whose notion of devotion plays into submissive martyrdom, Stanley advocates "love for something higher, because that's the only place art is really free, serving something higher than itself" (TR, 632). In contrast to the latter, however, his intention is liberation, not selfish redemption, and accordingly he sacrifices himself for his work, literally enacting the suggestion that "every piece of created work is the tomb of its creator" (TR, 323). When the composer travels to Rome in order to eventually perform his piece of music, he undertakes a Herculean unifying process, merging his notes into a final score. Among his "stack of palimpsests", however, Stanley makes "more mistakes than he ha[s] ever before" (TR, 827), and a subtle hint informs us about the diabolic currencies undercutting his endeavour, for when he finally performs his piece in the church of Fenestrula a tritone, "the devil's interval", has already sneaked into "the work he had copied" (TR, 956). The "walls quivered, still he did not hesitate. Everything moved, and even falling, soared in atonement" (*ibid.*). The last lines of the novel read: "He was the only person caught in the collapse, and afterward most of his work was recovered too, and it is still spoken of, when it is noted, with high regard,

³⁰³ The basis of Stanley's observations appear to be taken from Norbert Wiener's *The Human Use of Human Beings*, in which the mathematician refers to religious and philosophical conceptualisations of entropy, for instance St. Augustine's discussion of chaos as a "negative evil" in the sense of "incompleteness". Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1954), 11. While chaos is similarly valorised in *Agapē Agape*, Gaddis's own position may be best summarised with a dictum by Mr. Gibbs in *J R*, who holds that "Order is simply a thin perilous condition that we try to impose on the basic reality of chaos" (JR, 20). For a brief discussion of Gaddis's work in relation to entropy see Stephen Schryer, "The Aesthetics of First- and Second-Order Cybernetics in William Gaddis's *J R*", in *Paper Empire: William Gaddis and the World System*, ed. Joseph Tabbi and Rone Shavers (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007), 86.

though seldom played” (TR, 956).³⁰⁴ Stanley might indeed fail in his attempt to bridge “the gulf between people and modern art” (TR, 632), and immanence in the form of brute gravity literally crushes his endeavours. As bleak as this appears, Gaddis, as I want to demonstrate here, is not entirely negative as regards the possibilities of art after art’s exhaustion, for amidst the moment of collapse there are also indicators, albeit *ex negativo*, how art can persist against that which is. Stanley’s breakdown, I contend, is no ultimate sign of defeat since his work, though seldom played, is at least remembered and respected.³⁰⁵ Thus, even though chance undoes the artist, the collapse, to use an argument by Adorno, is also a

cryptogram of the new [...]; only by virtue of the absolute negativity of collapse does art enunciate the unspeakable: utopia. In this image of collapse all the stigmata of the repulsive and loathsome in modern art gather. Through the irreconcilable renunciation of the semblance of reconciliation, art holds fast to the promise of reconciliation in the midst of the unreconciled [...]³⁰⁶

I think one finds similar suggestions in Wyatt’s *metanoia* at the end of the novel.

Having laid out the mythographic principles with which Gaddis operates, I will now turn to an analysis of his protagonist’s career from failed artist to forger. In doing so I will show how *The Recognitions* utilises the myth of Faust in order to satirise the materialism of post-war America while remaining critical towards Wyatt’s reactionary agenda.

3. Wyatt Gwyon, Faustian Forger

God creates from nothing, we create from ruins!
We have to beat ourselves to pieces
first before we know what we are
and what we are capable of! – Appalling fate!
—Christian Dietrich Grabbe, *Don Juan und Faust*³⁰⁷

[A]rt has grown impossible sans the Devil’s aid
—Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus*³⁰⁸

³⁰⁴ As regards the assessment of the ending of the novel, Johnston questions whether most critics’ assessment of Stanley’s [Wyatt’s] end as a victory and his “epiphany on the hill as a sign of redemption” is not too simplistic (*Carnival*, 106).

³⁰⁵ What comes to mind is the forgotten hymn by William Slothrop that concludes *Gravity’s Rainbow*.

³⁰⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 41.

³⁰⁷ Christian Dietrich Grabbe, *Don Juan und Faust: Eine Tragödie in vier Akten* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2005), 21 (my translation).

In Gaddis scholarship, the classical approach is to see in Wyatt an “enormous artistic talent that [can] find no inspiration worthy of its powers”, no meaningful activity, and who is thus deluded by evil forces into producing cultural commodities.³⁰⁹ The culmination of this is his pact with the devilish art dealer Brown. His fate, in such readings, reflects the “plight of the artist in America”, who suffers from the loss of a socio-aesthetical unity, the devaluation of art’s social function in a disenchanted world, and, emergent from this, the impression that all cultural activities are equally ‘worthless’.³¹⁰ While such readings are valid in some respects, I hold that Gaddis provides a more differentiated account. Despite the predominant references to Goethe’s text, the background to the Faustian wager Gaddis depicts is very similar to Mann’s *Doctor Faustus*. Like Leverkühn, Wyatt tries to overcome his personal and artistic aporia with the aid of the ‘adversary’ and thereby experiences dialectical reversal of liberation into unfreedom. Wyatt subjects himself and his work to the ‘graven rules’ of the Guild of Flemish painters, thereby aiming to achieve a model of artistic exchange and meaningful art production beyond the parameters of relativistic individualism and commerce. The irony involved in this, however, is that Gaddis suggests that the spheres of religion, art, commerce, and crime are not discrete but insidiously interlocked.

3.1. Portrait of the Artist as a Young Protestant

A first factor to be considered is Wyatt’s upbringing. The painter’s youth is marked by the loss of his mother and the disinterest of his father, but even more so by the religious indoctrination by his “Christian mentor” (TR, 19) Aunt May.³¹¹ In her increasingly neurotic self-perpetuation and (a)social reproduction of faith, this decidedly political Calvinist (“NO CROSS NO CROWN”, TR 40) embodies the

³⁰⁸ Mann, *Doctor Faustus*, 523.

³⁰⁹ Koenig, “The Writing of *The Recognitions*”, 21.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹¹ Don Roger Cunningham aptly characterises May as a fanatic in *Cabala to Entropy: Existentialist Attitudes and the Gnostic Vision in Gaddis’s ‘The Recognitions’ and Julio Cortazar’s ‘Rayuela’* (Dissertation. Indiana University, 1980), 48-49. He substantiates his argument with a passage from Gabriel Vahanian’s *Wait Without Idols* that fully relates to Weber’s and Voegelin’s observations, as discussed in my second chapter, and Pynchon’s depiction of Puritans. Vahanian writes: In the decay of Puritan New England society “the transcendental [sic] vision of man’s destiny capitulated before an immanentist vision of the universe ... Such an attitude is but the religious disguise of man’s pretension to become like God, the self-righteous and perverse hallowing of man’s attempt to deify himself”. Gabriel Vahanian, *Wait Without Idols* (New York: George Braziller, 1964), 51-55.

principles of pastoral power.³¹² In purporting to be a prophet of redemption, May remorselessly propagates the Puritan complex of depravity, guilt and predestination. She has the boy internalise the five doctrines of the synod of Dort (unconditional election, limited atonement, total depravity, irresistibility of grace, final perseverance of the saints) and with that the conviction that “there was no more hope for the damned than there was fear for the Elect” (TR, 35). The latter provides the fatal basis of Wyatt’s struggle with belief, epitomised in his question whether he is the man “for whom Jesus Christ died” (TR, 127, 348, 440). Circulating May’s currency of guilt, he falls from the Ur-Christian triad of faith, hope and love into the pits of what Don Roger Cunningham describes as the New England guilt-culture: “guilt is the result of separation from God, but when approached on this level it creates despair, which perpetuates the separation”.³¹³ The latter is a central motif of *The Recognitions*. As Gaddis comments, the novel “at once sets Guilt in view [...] Then guilt goes on, in the body of the thing, being built up from the bottom (and Sigismundo’s ‘the greatest sin of man is being born’).”³¹⁴ It appears that Wyatt comes to count himself among the reprobate, to think that suffering is the only legitimate activity of man on earth. Thus, feeding on the “pitilessness of the Bosch painting”, with which he is in close contact, he elaborates “a domain where the agony of man took remarkable directions” (TR, 35). Misrecognising cause and effect, May interprets the boy’s unease as an expression of ‘evil’:

—Did you see the guilty look on his face? His sinful...

—Sinned! Where has he sinned... already...

[...]

—Not his sin then, but the prospect, she came on [...], —the prospect draws him on, the prospect of sin (TR, 33)

³¹² For the concept of pastoral power see Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power”, in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, vol. 3, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley *et al.* (London: Penguin, 2002), 333.

³¹³ Cunningham, *Cabala to Entropy*, 69.

³¹⁴ Cited in Koenig, *Splinters*, 39. The frame was to feature an I-narrator who was responsible for a friend’s death. The personal notion of guilt arisen from neglected responsibility, however, was to make way to one that is more culturally entrenched, as expressed in Watt’s Protestant lineage as “lives conceived in guilt and perpetuated in refusal” (TR, 13). As mentioned, the working note and several quotations in the novel (“Pues dime Sigismundo, dí: El delito mayor del hombre es haber nacido”: TR, 393, cf. 820, 876) refer to Sigismundo in Calcedón’s *La Vida es sueño*.

May clearly exemplifies how prohibitive law generates sin, for her indoctrination with guilt and her aversion to originality considerably contribute to the boy's straying from the path.³¹⁵ If such misguidance needed an objective correlative, it can be found on the highway to Aunt May's New England town where the warning arrow in the curve points the wrong way (TR, 30). Wyatt's first drawing, significantly of a robin,³¹⁶ provokes May to deliver a fateful kitchen sermon, for to sin is "to falsify something in the Divine Order" (TR, 34) and mortal creative work is "definitely one of His damndest things" (TR, 33):

—[Then] why do you try to take his place? Our Lord is the only true creator, and only sinful people try to emulate Him [...] That is why Satan is the Fallen Angel, for he rebelled when he tried to emulate Our Lord Jesus. (TR, 34)

Lucifer's attempt 'to become original' is strongly related to the Lutheran notion that the Devil is the ape of God, an imitator of the latter through 'simian mimicry', and everyone trying to be original is deemed to be of his party.³¹⁷ Thus, G. K. Chesterton can ironically describe the poet Lucian Gregory in *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908) as "a blend of the angel and the ape", and Wyndham Lewis can entitle his artist satire *The Apes of God* (1930).³¹⁸ Such is the traditional view: the world is made by the Creator, and artistic human endeavour can only be directed at reading the 'book of the world' by means of allegoresis.³¹⁹ However, the prohibition of originality

³¹⁵ Slavoj Žižek discusses the creation of sin by prohibitive law concisely in *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), 15, 49-50.

³¹⁶ In Goethe's *Faust* the soul is often likened to a bird. From the start Mephistopheles compares Faust and his better parts to a bird (F, 1860-62: "I'll drag him through life's wastes, through every kind/ Of meaningless banality; He'll struggle like a bird stuck fast [...]"; see also F 11660 ("It's called the soul, 'Psyche'—pull off its wings"), which recalls the bird imagery recurrent in *The Recognitions*, especially in Wyatt's last moments: "Stephen laughed above him, stepping away. He opened his hand. The bird struck it and went free. —Hear...? Bells sounded, far down the hill there. —Goodbye" (TR, 899).

³¹⁷ See Nick Groom, *The Forger's Shadow: How Forgery Changed the Course of Literature* (London: Picador, 2002), 38.

³¹⁸ G. K. Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday: A Nightmare* (London: Penguin, 1986), 10.

³¹⁹ Such notions are then to be challenged in Romanticism with the topos of Prometheus as bringer of light and Shaftsbury's notion of the artist as second-maker and creative work as a human prerogative. Edward Young's apotheosis of original composition then fully inverts the notion of the natural in relation to the original: the Original is of an organic nature, imitations are a mechanic manufacture out of pre-existent materials. In Gaddis's times, originality in art is then crucially reassessed. Bernard Berenson, in *Aesthetics and History*, points out "originality may even be considered a trait of a decaying civilization" (cited in Knight, „Flemish Art“, 60). Adorno dismisses the Romantic concept of genius because, "works are not creations and humans are not creators" (*Aesthetic Theory*, 224). "Because of its element of something that had not existed before," he proceeds, "the genial was bound up with the concept of originality: thus the concept *Originalgenie*. As is well known, prior to the age of genius the idea of originality bore no authority (*ibid.*, 226).

backfires in *The Recognitions*. Aunt May allows Wyatt to copy paintings. Her naïve assumption is that mimesis of mimesis is less sinful. The child, internalising the doctrine that the creative God must not be imitated in his originality, begins copying paintings. The effects of May's cockeyed permission to copy paintings, as the narrator informs us, is that Wyatt's painting "was hardly original, but derived from the horror of the Breughel copy in his father's study, and the pitilessness of the Bosch" (TR, 35). Ironically, the prohibitive law thereby not only contributes to Wyatt's later criminal acts of forgery, but also lays the basis of the painter's delusion that his work is within the divine scheme and eventually may contribute to some sort of redemption. As Julián Jiménez Heffernan argues, Wyatt's later obsession with agony, suffering, and pain is "of strictly Lutheran or Calvinistic origin"; it is "the spiritual agony that precedes atonement".³²⁰ This notion is highly reminiscent of the Thomistic debate in *Doctor Faustus*, more specifically Adrian's opinion that a "sinfulness so hopeless that it allows its man fundamentally to despair of hope is the true theological path to salvation" (DF, 262). Moreover, as the plethora of allusions to Wyatt's secrecy and guilt indicate, he, like Leverkühn, never leaves the orbit of Puritanism and perpetuates in his attempt to redeem art the very principles of agony and suffering inscribed into the soteriological system.

The second motivating factor is related to Wyatt's father. Exposed to Gwyon's relativist structuralism in the manner of Frazer, Graves, and Frederick Cornwallis Conybeare, which is directly opposed to Aunt May's Puritan fundamentalism, Wyatt learns the mechanisms of elusiveness and ambiguity that help him survive the pact with Brown, but the multitude of contradicting views on religion also contribute to his existential insecurity. Gwyon raises in Wyatt the suspicion that Saints are counterfeits of Christ and Christ a counterfeit of God (TR, 483), who is presumably not an original either but a counterfeit of Mithras (cf. TR, 57). Consequently, when Wyatt copies the Bosch painting in his youth and encounters this "original" again in Brown's apartment, unable to determine whether it is a counterfeit or not, the crucial question for him is whether the Christian world-view is valid or not: "And if what I've been forging, does not exist?" (TR, 381). This question becomes even more pressing as Wyatt's father, who becomes a divine figure for the son, turns away from the latter.

³²⁰ Heffernan, "The Recognitions by William Gaddis", 78.

Gaddis invites here a religious but also a Freudian reading.³²¹ Freud's thesis that God is nothing other than an exalted father is paraphrased in the very first chapter: "There was some confusion in his mind when his father returned, for somehow his father and the Lord were the same person" (TR, 20).³²² Another seemingly 'insane' act of the boy substantiates this reading:

Wyatt was four years old when his father returned [...] He was in celebrant spirits that spring day, and observed the solemn homecoming by emptying the pot on which he mediated for an hour or so each morning into a floor register. (TR, 18)

Read against Freud's "identification of excrement as the primordial form of gift," one might understand this gesture as religious; Wyatt offers the paternal deity an innermost piece of himself that "oscillates radically between the sublime and [...] the excremental".³²³ Wyatt's experience with the paternal/God figure, however, is one characterised by loss: "his father, withdrawing into his study with a deftness for absenting himself at crucial moments akin to that talent of the Lord, had become unattainable" (TR, 35, cf. 27). Such feeling of unattainability never leaves the son and substantially contributes to his later pact.

There is, however, a further element in Wyatt's apparent inability to produce originals. The young painter leaves his few attempted original works "off at the moment the pattern is conceived but not executed" (TR, 52, cf. 55). Although he offers no definitive explanation, Gaddis makes available the implication that this habit is related to another form of fear from loss. Wyatt secretly begins a painting of his mother Camilla, who is consistently attributed with Gnostic and Platonic imagery, for instance as a "shred of perfection" (TR, 15).³²⁴ He does so, of course, from memory,

³²¹ Wyatt's quest also bears distinctly Oedipal implications; see Dominick LaCapra, "Singed Phoenix and Gift of Tongues: William Gaddis's *The Recognitions*". *Diacritics* 16, no. 4 (1986): 46. Yet although Freudian concepts permeate *The Recognitions*, the general attitude toward the latter may be summarised with one of its characters' outbursts: "Freud my ahss" (TR, 477).

³²² Cf. Sigmund Freud, "Totem and Taboo", *The Penguin Freud Library*, vol. 13, *The Origins of Religion*, ed. Albert Dickson (London: Penguin, 1990), 209.

³²³ Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, 150; see also my later discussion of Pynchon's employment of references to excrement in the analysis of Slothrop's quest.

³²⁴ Many passages in the novel suggest that the painter's mother Camilla represents the upper Sophia of the Gnostics; after her death as a Protestant 'heretic' in Spain she is constantly associated with the moon and once positively identified as a part of the *pleroma*, a "shred of perfection" (TR, 48). Gaddis supplements the moon imagery with the mythical theme of the Thessalonian witches who were said to be able to draw the moon down with their charms (noteworthy in this respect is also *Faust II*, especially the lunar symbolism in the Classical Walpurgis night and the Helena act).

but is yet again unable being able to complete it. Reverend Gwyon glances at the painting now and then, and

in the momentary absence of his stare and the force of his own plastic imagination, it might have completed itself. Still each time he returned to it, it was slightly different than he remembered, intractably thwarting the completion he had managed himself. (TR, 57)

The unfinished painting, as Wyatt explains later, signifies a stage in the work process he does not want to transcend because “[t]here is something about a... an unfinished piece of work [...] do you see? Where perfection is still possible. Because it’s there, it’s there all the time, all the time you work trying to uncover it” (TR, 57). The Platonic implication of this is naturally that a painting will always remain a representation, or copy, of an idea, and like Helen in *Faust*, the ideal of aesthetic perfection is unreachable, for it evaporates as soon as Wyatt tries to seize it. Yet with completion comes also the recognition of possibilities lost. As he argues: “when I attach the signature [...] that changes everything, when I attach the signature and... lose it” (TR, 251). What then remains is a “melancholia of things completed” (TR, 69).³²⁵ Since Wyatt draws his self-validation only from work, the perfection of art thereby becoming a means of self-perfection, however, his sense of self is questioned as soon as his activity ceases. Thus, a Puritan Faust in the best manner, he is compelled to continue working, and his later forgeries, the most crucial element of which is technical incompleteness, are a perfect field of exercise for this compulsion.³²⁶

Wyatt finally manages to escape from New England and studies painting in Munich with a teacher called Koppel. Koppel’s approach to art finds recognition in Wyatt, for it provides an artistic justification of what the boy has learned from his aunt. Notions of necessity and purity thereby substantiate her prohibition. Koppel, averse to the concepts of *Originalgenie*, proclaims:

³²⁵ Moore has pointed out in his *Reader’s Guide* that Gaddis took the melancholy phrase from section 277 of Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*: “—Bad enough! The same old story! When you have finished building your house, you suddenly notice that you have learned something in the process that you absolutely needed to know before you *started* building. The eternal, tiresome “too late!” – The melancholy of everything *finished!*” Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, ed. Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 165. In a similar vein, Gaddis wrote in a letter to Steven Moore that he “abruptly realized [...] that I’d reached the end of the book; that no matter my planning & intentions, & even that sense of loss overreaching any of fulfilment, there was no arguing it”. John Kuehl and Steven Moore, “Introduction”, in *In Recognition of William Gaddis*, ed. John Kuehl and Steven Moore (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1984), 8.

³²⁶ Again, Gaddis makes a Freudian reading available. While the painting remains unfinished, traces of Camilla seem to recur in Wyatt’s subsequent forgeries as if he suffered from a *Wiederholungszwang*.

That romantic disease, originality, all around we see originality of incompetent idiots, they could draw nothing, paint nothing, just so the mess they the right way, so you could only do it in your own way. When you paint you do not want to be make it original... Even two hundred years ago who wanted to be original, to be original was to admit that you could not do a thing the right way, so you could only do it in your way. When you paint you do not try to be original, only you think about your work, how to make it better, so you copy masters, only masters, for with each copy of a copy the form degenerates...you do not invent shapes, you know them, *auswendig wissen Sie, by heart* [...] (TR, 89)

The Platonic implications of Koppel's tirade, ironically reported by Wyatt from memory ('by heart'), are by no means straightforward. Benesch has pointed out that Koppel's "auswendig" not only refers to a mnemotechnical modus but also implies a turning inside out of the remembered: *wenden* 'to turn', *auswenden* 'turn inside out'.³²⁷ I would argue that Koppel's remark does not merely reflect a Platonic move toward ideas by repetition of forms as a technique of unconcealment. Firstly, anamnesis is highly suspicious in a world where memories are "rotting rooms" (TR, 701, 711); secondly, the act of tuning the inside out also implies the latter's inversion. Koppel's dictum, diligently followed by Wyatt, amounts here to a mode of violence that is hardly different to the aesthetic Fascism of the plastic surgeon Schoenmaker in Pynchon's *V.*, who brutally realises his 'idea' of the perfect woman at the cost of the latter.³²⁸ As regards Wyatt, violence and suffering do not only constitute crucial parts of his *modus operandi*. His forgeries provide him with an ideal interplay between perfection and destruction. Wyatt seeks perfection, and the assembly of constellations of elements remembered from the masters provides him with such. Devoting his life to 'perfected limitations', that is, an exegesis of rules set by the Flemish Primitives, Wyatt inhabits a well-defined system. Yet his forgeries (paradoxically) also leave him with a sense of retained possibilities, since incompleteness is a crucial element of them, for what eventually adds to their saleability is not only the accurate reproduction of

³²⁷ Benesch, "In the Diaspora of Words", 39.

³²⁸ For a detailed discussion see my discussion of *V.* Moreover, Wyatt's Platonism is supplemented and ironically undercut by references to Praxiteles, the ancient sculptor, who is given in Cicero's *Paradoxa* "no credit for anything of his own in his work, but just for removing the excess marble until he reached the real form that was there all the time. Yes, the um... masters who didn't have to invent..." (TR, 124). Wyatt might understand anamnesis as a relief from invention, from being original. Idealised notions of the 'real form', however, are not upheld in the novel. Anselm, for instance, blatantly deflates them: "Praxiteles' statue of Phryne. Who the hell do you think was hiding inside his block of stone but a high-class whore" (TR, 185, cf. 76).

materials and techniques or the profusion of minute details but also their physical corruption. As Wyatt holds:

It is, it's the most difficult part. Not the actual damaging it, but damaging it without trying to preserve the parts that cost such... well, you know that's where they fail, a good many painters who did this kind of work, they can't resist saving those parts [...] (TR, 242)³²⁹

Having failed as artist in Paris, Wyatt tries to sustain himself by restoring paintings and producing blueprints for an architect (he designs bridges, just like Dion Anthony in O'Neill's *The Great God Brown*). Wyatt's discontented wife Esther then provides a final push. Strictly speaking, she incites him to produce paintings of his own: "If you could finish something original, she said" (TR, 89). However, since her "search for Reason [is] always interrupted by reasons" (TR, 79), she is not able to talk reason into Wyatt. On the contrary, "like other women in love, salvation was her original purpose, [...] and, like most women, she could not wait to see him thoroughly damned first, before she stepped in" (TR, 78).³³⁰ Thus, despite good intentions, she spurs Wyatt's ambition:

Copying lines, copying plans, one bridge after another. Oh, all right, it isn't silly but you could do better, you could do more. Honestly, Wyatt, the way you go day after day with your job ad your reading and your... fooling around, and you could do more. (TR, 84)

This notion of being able to 'do more' does not so much reflect the concept of a 'self who can do more' as discussed earlier. It is no coincidence that the novel's Mephistopheles, Reckall Brown, appeals to the vanity of Wyatt, who shares with van der Goes the "tremendous passion, aiming at just a fraction more than he could ever accomplish" (TR, 230).³³¹ During their first encounter, the dealer provokes the painter by asking "do you want to tell me you can do more than patch up old pictures?", and

³²⁹ Knight discusses in this context Wyatt's sense of debilitation in relation to perfection, or completion (*Hints and Guesses*, 41; cf. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 229: "Every step toward the perfection of artworks is a step toward their self-alienation"). This interpretation, I dare argue, does not acknowledge that in these cases the "imperfection" through destruction is aimed at creating an aura of authenticity and veneration, i.e. that the aesthetic reduction, like the profusion of minute details in the remainder of Wyatt's paintings, is eventually determined by the marketability of his forgeries.

³³⁰ Here is a clear relation to Pynchon's Benny Profane, who happily considers himself "another means to grace or indulgence" (V. 134) for the women with whom he is together, hoping their redeeming work relieves him from a conscious and responsible lifestyle.

³³¹ See Knight, *Hints and Guesses*, 70.

the answer is “Of course I can” (TR, 142). Even though Wyatt eventually accepts Brown’s offer because it is the only one available to him, the latter will lead to the fulfilment of his Faustian potentials.³³² Yet this is not a simple succumbing to innate ‘sinfulness’ but characterised by a fetishized relation to work and salvation that is hardly different to the Protestant work ethic, as I demonstrate in the following.

3.2. The Father of False Art: Wyatt’s Bargain

We know from Gaddis’s notes that the art dealer Brown is meant to be the epitome of ‘evil’: base matter in its full depravity. The fierce procto-pun of his name clearly reflects Freudian connections between money and anality, and fittingly, he has his own way of dealing with the art crisis. “Art today is spelled with an *f*” (TR, 143) is his simple equation. Like Mephistopheles, he is a cynic (introduced in association with a dog: F, 1147; TR, 135) who describes himself as a necessary evil in the service of good (F, 1336; TR, 141), and like Mephistopheles he is a facilitator and mediator. Brown mediates, not only between the producer Wyatt and the customer but also between Wyatt’s ivory tower and the outside world: “one comes to grips with reality only through the commission of evil” (TR, 235). Accordingly, Reck tall, characterised metonymically via possessions, his diamond ring or “his set of gold teeth” (TR, 223),³³³ is “real as hell” (TR, 247) and also business: “Business is cooperation with reality” (TR, 243).³³⁴ His conviction that “[m]oney gives significance to anything” (TR, 144) intuitively grasps what J. M. Bernstein describes as the logic of capital: “the destruction of all *natural* boundaries, all given teleologies [...] indefinite expansion, and its consequent drive for universality”.³³⁵ And where the dollar sign becomes a universal signifier, an end in itself, the cause, means, and aim of human

³³² Vanwesenbeeck argues in a demystified reading of the novel: after Wyatt’s failure to sell his originals and to connect with the post-World War II art scene, “Mephistopheles is the only art commissioner left” (*Agapē Agape*, 89).

³³³ See Safer, “Ironic Allusiveness”, 73.

³³⁴ Sloterdijk excellently discusses Mephistopheles as a kind of first post-Christian realist. To “conclude a pact with the Devil”, he argues in the case of Goethe, “means nothing more than to become a realist, that is, to take the world and people as they are” (*Critique of Cynical Reason*, 187). It is exactly this realism, however, where “cynicism and enlightenment touch. For enlightenment furthers the empirical realistic disposition, and where this advances without obstruction it inevitably leaves the limits of morality behind. ‘Realistic’ thinking must constantly use an amoral freedom in order to attain clarity. A science of reality becomes possible only where metaphysical dualism has been ruptured, where the inquiring spirit has constructed a consciousness beyond good and evil, where, without metaphysical and moral prejudice, neutral and tedious, it searches for what is the case” (*ibid.*).

³³⁵ J.M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992), 265-66.

activity, ethics become obsolete; thus it is no wonder that Brown resents any moral objections to money as sanctimonious:

What I get a kick out of is these serious writers who write a book where they say money gives false significance to art, and then they raise hell when their book doesn't make any money. (TR, 749)

Instead of investing into 'serious' books, Brown therefore thinks of a "novel factory", an "assembly line" (TR, 243, 356) or mass products "tailored to the public taste" (TR, 243).³³⁶ He makes good money with chalk toothpaste and

from some simple chemical that women use for their menstrual periods, such a delicate necessity that the shame and secrecy involved make it possible to sell it at some absurd price. (*Ibid.*)

Brown exploits his customers' shame and secrecy as well as their spiritual needs. He publishes a highly popular book the reviewers call "soul-searching", which prompts his critic Basil Valentine to retort: "Soul-searching! [...] People like that haven't a soul to search" (TR, 353).³³⁷ The Mephistophelian character, however, a "Master *Dicis-et-non-facis*" (DF, 106), to use Mann's words, always delivers less than he promises, widening the gulf of desire between demand and gratification,³³⁸ while hiding the secret that his 'magic', money, is not a universal agent by continually proclaiming the converse. Thus, he eventually signifies "a promise of magic unfulfilled" (TR, 223), and what appears to others as "occult powers" (TR, 226) is simply the ability to find their weak spot.

In addition to exploiting Wyatt's "desperate attempts to reconcile the ideal with reality" (TR, 383) as Basil Valentine holds, Brown exploits the painter's need for a

³³⁶ See Ingendaay, *Die Romane*, 30.

³³⁷ This anticipates Christopher Lasch's argument that capitalism "has given rise to [...] the narcissistic culture of our time, which has translated the predatory individualism of the American Adam into a therapeutic jargon that celebrates not so much individualism as solipsism, justifying self-absorption as 'authenticity' and 'awareness'". Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York/ London: W.W. Norton, 1991), 218.

³³⁸ Interestingly, Freud, in "Beyond The Pleasure Principle", explains desire as a Faustian drive: "All the sublimations and recreation-formations and surrogate-formations in the world are never enough to resolve the abiding tension: and the gulf between the level of gratificatory pleasure *demand*ed and the level actually *achieved* produces that driving force that prevents the individual from resting content with any situation he ever contrives, and instead – as the poet says – he 'presses ever onward unbridled, untamed' (Mephisto in *Faust I*, 'Faust's Study')". Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*, trans. John Reddick (London: Penguin, 2003), 82.

father figure. His appropriation of Wyatt as a substitute son is not only reflected in his mediating position à la Mithras or the concomitant alcoholism of Gwyon, Wyatt and himself, but also in his continual employment of the phrase “my boy” (TR, 143) to address his protégé and his promise to take care and “watch out for” (TR, 365) him. This pseudo-paternal relationship may recall Charles Dickens’s Fagin, but it is also strikingly similar to the psychogram of the Bavarian painter Christopher Haizman discussed in Sigmund Freud’s “A Seventeenth-Century Demonological Neurosis”.³³⁹ Freud argues that Haizman, who had lost his father early, fantasised about making a pact with the devil in order to obtain a father-substitute.

The position would simply be that a man, in the torment and perplexity of a melancholic depression, signs a bond with the Devil, to whom he ascribes the greatest therapeutic power.³⁴⁰

Haizman’s question, “Poor Devil, what can you offer to me?” (F, 1675), is thus answered, in Freud’s reasoning, by the devil: “Myself.” Gaddis also plays with such possibilities when he has Wyatt speculate whether he and Brown are psychological projections of the notorious Reverend Gilbert-Sullivan:

—You and I, Brown. You and I. You are so damned familiar.
—You’ve got to get hold of yourself, my boy.
—If we are, as he says, projections of his unconscious. Then the intimacy is not at all remarkable, is it. (TR, 361)³⁴¹

The intimacy is indeed remarkable, but it is not, as I would argue, because Brown is a figment of Wyatt’s imagination or because both are projections. Brown is too base, too blunt to be something other than real. Rather, Wyatt knows very well that he, as a failed painter, bargains for entirely prosaic reasons:

³³⁹ Sigmund Freud, “A Seventeenth-Century Demonological Neurosis”, *The Penguin Freud Library*, Vol. 14, *Art and Literature*, ed. Albert Dickson (London: Penguin, 1990), 377-423.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 397; cf. 399-401.

³⁴¹ Eric A. Blackall discusses several Faust stories in which the devil is a part of man’s mind in “Twentieth-Century Faustus”, *Faust through Four Centuries: Retrospect and Analysis*, ed. Peter Boerner and Sidney Johnson (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1989), 198; cf. Jackson, *Fantasy*, 55-6. The devils in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* and in Mann’s *Doctor Faustus*, for instance, can be read as psychological projections. Most explicit in this respect is Jackie Duluoiz in Kerouac, who states that Doctor Sax is only to be found in the “corner of my mind” (*Doctor Sax*, 11).

- My dear fellow, the priest is the guardian of mysteries. The artist is driven to expose them.
- A fatal likeness, then.
- A fatal dissention, and a fatal attraction. Tell me, does Brown pay you well?
- Pay me? I suppose. The money piles up there.
- Why?
- The money? It... binds the contract. (TR, 261)

Thus, Freudian implications aside, it is eventually criminally acquired money that connects Wyatt and Brown. Despite the former's comment "I suppose", he is clearly aware that the money accumulates in the bank account shared with the dealer. The money binds the contract. Thus, if "the devil is the father of false art" (TR, 464), Wyatt is unmistakably his son.

If Christopher Leise is right in arguing that Gaddis's "writing congratulates artworks that expose America's thinking of gold *synecdochically*, as one kind of discourse that serves in place of the full set of numerous, competing discourses which compose contemporary life",³⁴² then one has to add that the synecdochic reduction Wyatt is exposed to in his career is only possible because all other dominant discourses in *The Recognitions* have already embraced economic principles. In his 'moral education' by Aunt May, for instance, Wyatt is conditioned along two coordinates of the Protestant work ethic: (1.) hard work is the expression of gratitude where "[a]nything pleasurable could be counted upon to be, if not categorically evil, then worse, a waste of time" (TR, 13); (2.) money "might be expected to accrue as incidental testimonial" (TR, 14) of election, and in accordance with John Wesley's credo "grow rich", Wyatt's descendants disapprove of almost everything else except compound interest.³⁴³ May even goes so far as to employ mercantile lexis when she contemplates "wholesale damnation" for the non-Christian world (TR, 38). The currencies of this rhetoric of guilt and election culminate in a phrase which prefigures Pynchon's take on the economic genealogy of New England: they "had done their work, passed on the heritage of guilt. The rest was not their business" (TR, 23). These coordinates are directly called upon in the pact with Brown, who lures Wyatt with hard work, good rewards, and the prospect of sin.

³⁴² Leise, "The Power of Babel: Art, Entropy, and Aporia in the Novels of William Gaddis", in *William Gaddis, 'The Last of Something': Critical Essays*, ed. Crystal Alberts *et al.* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2010), 36.

³⁴³ See Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 118-19.

Moreover, the maxim of the redemption of time, as constantly invoked by Wyatt, sporadically understood in criticism as lamentation over his ‘wasted’ youth, indeed expresses an economy entrenched in the very pathology of the text. The employment of the phrase is indebted to Eliot’s ‘Burnt Norton’, to which Gaddis frequently alludes in the novel, but Wyatt’s repeated stress on Saint Paul sets it in a broader context. The Christian concept of redeeming time dates from Pauline teachings (“See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise. Redeeming the time, because the days are evil”, Eph. 5:15-16); it is again invoked in St. Augustine’s *Confessiones* in the context of redeeming wasted years.³⁴⁴ During the Reformation, the desideratum of redemption acquired aspects of an “urgent pragmatism”,³⁴⁵ especially in the teachings of Calvin, who comments on Eph. 5:16 as follows:

Since the age is corrupt, the devil appears to have seized tyrannical power; so that time cannot be dedicated to God without being in some way redeemed. And what shall be the price of its redemption? To withdraw from the endless allurements which would easily pervert us [...]³⁴⁶

Such strategies against idleness became imperative in the preaching of John Wesley, who is included in the ‘rogues’ gallery’ in Gaddis novel. Wyatt tries to ignore the dollar bill as a universal soteriological agent, yet the economic dimension of his work is present from the very beginning of his career. Not only does he raise the money necessary for his escape from New England by selling the Bosch; his teacher Koppel, as it later transpires, gives his rhetoric of ‘corruption’ an entirely new dimension by selling an early Memling counterfeit by Wyatt (TR, 95).³⁴⁷ The latter’s first encounter with the world of art critics establishes that the painter could not care less about money. Trying to sustain himself by producing art of his own in Paris, the expatriate has to learn: “il faut toujours en avoir sur soi, de l’argent” (TR, 69). An opportunity to earn easy cash is introduced by the critic Crémer (the name recalling an old fashioned German word for *merchant*). The critic offers to review Wyatt’s few original

³⁴⁴ Leon Morris, “Redeem the Time”, in *Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*, ed. David Lyle Jeffrey (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1992), 658. Significant here is Augustine’s turn from Manichaeism to Christianity, i.e. the different notions of time and redemption in the two systems of belief (cf. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 206-40).

³⁴⁵ Morris, “Redeem the Time”, 658.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁷ Behind the character could stand van Meegeren’s middleman for selling a Vermeer to Göring, the banker and art dealer Alois Miedl, who was born in Munich. Koppel’s ties to commerce are reflected in his name. In German *Koppel* means ‘buckle’, but is also cognate to *kuppeln*, ‘to couple, pimp’.

paintings and tests the painter's will to success by quoting a remark by Degas that "the artist must approach his work in the same frame of mind in which the criminal commits his deed" (TR, 71). Crémer's suggestion of bribery, however, is refused, which results, to no surprise, in a scathing review in the magazine *Le Macule* that damages Wyatt's reputation by describing his paintings as "sans vie, enfin, un esprit de la mort sans l'espoir de la Résurrection" (TR, 74, cf. 665). The basic lesson of the failed Simonian investment is: no money, no resurrection.

In similar terms, Wyatt hardly notices the 'heaped up gold' in his bank account. However, hard work is the key phrase in his and Brown's agreement. When they meet for the first time, Wyatt already has done a job for the dealer:

—You did some work for me.

—For you?

—A Dutch picture, a picture of a landscape, an old one.

—Flemish. Yes, I remember it. That painting could hang in any museum...

—It does. [...] You couldn't tell it had been touched. Even an expert couldn't tell [...]
(TR, 141)

On a mythical level, this recalls a motif expounded on in Irving's "The Devil and Tom Walker", the thought of having collaborated with the devil from the start. Brown's then attempts to codify their corroboration. The subtext of their discussion is centred on the different meanings of *work*, *recognition* and *redemption*. Whereas Wyatt exclusively attributes spiritual meanings to these keywords, Brown's stresses materialistic denotations. Wyatt's talk about the perfect necessity of hard labour is thus met with a quick retort: "People work for money, my boy" (TR, 144):

—You know... Saint Paul tells us to redeem time.

—Does he? Reckall Brown's tone was gentle, encouraging.

—A work of art redeems time.

—And buying it redeems money, Reckall Brown said. (TR, 144)³⁴⁸

³⁴⁸ Gaddis continually plays with association of time and money. For instance, when Otto is grinding away in a banana plantation while finishing his play *The Vanity of Time*, he feels that the "hours of work were hours of vacant existence, but the minutes were pennies" (TR, 160). A further passage then comically mixes, Saint Paul, T. S. Eliot, and the work ethic: "The months of waiting were over, the months of non-entity. Saint Paul would have us redeem time; but if present and past are both present in time future, and that future contained in time past, there is no redemption but one. This one Otto now pressed with his writs to be certain that it had not disappeared" (*ibid.*). In this context, it is noteworthy

Sensing that he is losing ground, Brown subtly changes his tactic:

- Can you tell me you've never thought of this before?
—Of course I have. They were suddenly face to face. —It would be a lot of work.
—Work! Do you mind work? (TR, 145)

Here, Brown openly expresses what is latent in the Puritan concept of double predestination, and, although the decision to collaborate is never explicitly expressed, he finds a ready response in Wyatt's Puritan secrecy and guilt (TR, 95).

4. Frameworks and Counter-Currencies

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
—W.H. Auden, "Musée de Beaux Arts",³⁴⁹

As my brief examination of the preconditions of Wyatt's bargain shows, *The Recognitions* describes the desperate search for meaning that constitutes the starting point of Goethe's *Faust*. Yet its specific emphases, as I hold, are more intimately related to Mann's *Doctor Faustus*. Socially and spiritually alienated, Wyatt engages in a pact with what he opposes, and despite his priestly behaviour it is questionable whether he is fully unaware of the import of his bargain. As argued in the case of Agnes Deigh's 'Great Refusal' and Stanley's composition, Gaddis complicates possibilities of transcending the given. He finds one model to overcome society's pitfalls by 'forging gold'. The Flemish painters he forges represent to him a *modus operandi* opposed to the materialism of the American art industry. Even more so, he considers the alchemy of their aesthetics as a tool to overcome alienated art, and eventually his own alienation. He fuses artistic and alchemical concepts (*ars* and *technê*) to achieve a soteriological effect. It appears, however, that on the false premises that redemption is possible by means of an aesthetic category, Wyatt eventually serves "the false while knowing it is false".³⁵⁰

that Pynchon similarly conflates different concepts of time, heavily drawing, like Gaddis, from Eliot's *Four Quartets* (cf. Chambers, *Thomas Pynchon*, 172-73).

³⁴⁹ Cited in Heffernan, "The *Recognitions* by William Gaddis", 79.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

4.1. God's Gaze

The importance that Wyatt attributes to his Christian-alchemical framework is nowhere more explicitly expressed than in the following two quotations. When he suspects that the Hieronymus Bosch painting owned by his father was a copy, he wails, “Copying a copy? is that where I started?” (TR, 381), and when he learns that it was the original, he exclaims with the same vigour: “Yes, thank God! [...] Thank God there was the gold to forge!” (TR, 689). This painting is of uttermost importance in Gaddis's novel, for it provides one frame of the protagonist's mind-set. Chance has it that Wyatt's father owns the original ‘The Seven Sins and the Four Last Things’ (see Fig. 1). The painting was smuggled to America as a souvenir, and although it is indeed the original, “some fainaiguing had been necessary at Italian customs, confirming it a fake to get it out” (TR, 25). Since the painting is a tabletop and Puritans are pragmatic, the young painter ends up eating every day from the former. What he internalises from this is the following: in the centre of the tabletop is the eye of God; in the pupil there is Christ, displaying his wounds (offering salvation), and in the outer ring (the iris) is mirrored what God sees: the sins of the world. Such concepts, although anatomically inaccurate in this case – the iris reflects, not the pupil – were common in Bosch's time. In the medieval epithet *cordis speculator* God is considered the seer of hearts. Sebastian Brant's *Ship of Fools* (1494) suggests that it is a mirror, “where each his counterfeit may see”.³⁵¹ Similarly, Nicolas de Cusa, in his *Vision of God* (1453), equates the Divine Eye with a mirror. He writes:

Lord, Thou seest and hast eyes. Thou art an Eye [...] Thy sight, being an eye or living mirror, seeth all things in itself [...] Thou seemst to me at times such that I may think Thee to see all things in Thyself, as in a living mirror, wherein all things shine forth.³⁵²

And finally he posits the syllogism: “Absolute Power is Absolute Sight, which is very perfection” (*ibid.*). To be seen by God, in this equation, means uttermost transparency, pre-established harmony, but also a subjection of those he sees to his power. This notion is reflected in the Bosch tabletop employed in *The Recognitions*: the translation of the upper inscription of the tabletop is “For they are a nation void of counsel, neither is there any understanding in them. O that they were wise, that they

³⁵¹ Cited in Walter S. Gibson, *Hieronymus Bosch* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), 37.

³⁵² Nicholas of Cusa, *The Vision of God*, trans. Emma Gurney Salter (New York: Cosimo Inc., 2007), 55, 57.

understood this, that they would consider their later end”; the lower is “I will hide my face from them, I will see what their end shall be” (Deuteronomy 32: 28-29, 20).³⁵³ The inner eye represents “a mirror wherein the viewer is confronted by his own soul disfigured by vice”; at the same time, he “beholds the remedy for this disfigurement in the image of Christ in the centre”.³⁵⁴ The inscription under the resurrected Christ figure, *cave, cave dominus videt*, means ‘beware, beware, god is watching’. As a dramatic device, the redemptive possibilities represented by Bosch’s Christ in *The Recognitions* parallel the function of divine grace in Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*. In economic terms, God’s grace is, strictly speaking, also an interruption of the credit and debit of the Mephistophelian contract.³⁵⁵ For the painter Wyatt, the *dominus videt* becomes the precondition of his life and work, not only for Christian soteriological reasons but also because he thinks it was the premise under which the Flemish Masters painted:

There [in late Middle-Ages] was nothing God did not watch over, nothing, and so this... and so in the painting every detail reflects... God’s concern with the most insignificant objects in life, with everything, because God did not relax for an instant then, and neither could the painter then. Do you get the perspective in this? he demanded, thrusting the rumpled reproduction before them. —There isn’t any. There isn’t any single perspective, like the camera eye, the one we all look through now and call it realism, there... I take five or six or ten... the Flemish painter took twenty perspectives if he wished, and even in a small painting you can’t include it all in your single vision, your one miserable pair of eyes [...] (TR, 251)

Wyatt posits three things here. The first is a direct opposition to the limitation of the human gaze: working in the sight of God means absolute transparency and significance.³⁵⁶ Secondly, following the Bosch paradigm of *dominus videt*, he aspires redemption through imitating, not entirely modestly, the deity: “God did not relax [...] neither could the painter” (*ibid.*).

The conceptual approach behind Wyatt’s views on perspective in painting shows strong relations to the theories of the art historian Erwin Panofsky. In *Perspective as*

³⁵³ Gibson, *Hieronymus Bosch*, 36.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

³⁵⁵ Grace, as Agamben observes in the context of St. Paul’s writings, manifests itself as irreducible excess with regard to all obligatory service. Grace does not provide the foundation for exchange and social obligations; it makes for their interruption (*The Time That Remains*, 124).

³⁵⁶ Knight notes that the perspective in Wyatt’s paintings points to God’s omnipresence (*Hints and Guesses*, 49).

Symbolic Form, Panofsky demonstrates a profound knowledge of Renaissance art on the basis of Ernst Cassirer's theories of "symbolic forms".³⁵⁷ This theory conceives of perspective as a symbolic form through which art does serve the discovery of reality: Latin *perspectiva* for him means *Durchsehung*.³⁵⁸ The non-perspectival art of ancient and medieval times allowed for no, that is, unlimited points of view. The world in the painting is fully accessible as allegory. The Renaissance sees the emergence of linear perspective. The Flemish Primitives were at an intermediate point of such transition.³⁵⁹ Painters like van Eyck and van der Goes did neither follow the paradigm of earlier eras nor the single view of mathematical perspective, but employed what can be called "empirical perspective".³⁶⁰ In Panofsky's words, the "road leading to [the] new unity passes first of all [...] through the destruction of the existing unity, [...] the crystallization and isolation of the individual elements that were previously limited by mimetic-corporeal and perspective-spatial binds".³⁶¹ The shift in (or emergence of) perspective has crucial consequences for the space within the painting. Ancient and medieval painters conceived of a closed space, whereas the concept of infinite space, "though it had long been part of artistic intention, had not yet been rationalized or rendered in mathematical form".³⁶²

For Panofsky, the Southern Renaissance therefore arrived at a total rationalisation of space that liberates the latter from finiteness but binds it to human consciousness. The ultimate goal of this tendency is that perspective may be conceived of "both as the consolidation and systematization of the outside world as an extension of the sphere of the I".³⁶³ Here, Panofsky identifies early tendencies of the Cartesian revolution and the introduction of Kantian transcendentals. Panofsky, however, and

³⁵⁷ Michael Ann Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1985), 12.

³⁵⁸ Erwin Panofski, *Early Netherland Painting: Its Origins and Character* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 3.

³⁵⁹ Primitive, from Latin *primus* 'the first', refers to their innovations. On a general level, the relation of Early Renaissance artists to classical antiquity was dominated by two antithetical impulses: while wanting to retrieve it, they were compelled to transcend it; cf. Silvia Ferretti, *Cassirer, Panofsky, and Warburg: Symbol, Art, and History*, trans. Richard Pierce (New Haven/ London: Yale University Press, 1989), 196. The (late) medieval return to antiquity, although it destroyed the classical model of perspective, still conserved its parts assembled in different units (*ibid.*, 204-05).

³⁶⁰ Thanks to Christian Tico Seifert, Senior Curator for Early Netherlandish, Dutch and Flemish Art at the National Gallery of Scotland, for pointing me to this term. Christopher Knight paraphrases a similar term "The Flemish painters were, of course, not as strict as the Italians in their application of perspective. Theirs was not a 'correct' perspective, mathematically conceived, but one acquired from a close study of nature" ("Flemish Art and Wyatt's Quest", 62).

³⁶¹ Cited in Ferretti, *Cassirer*, 205.

³⁶² *Ibid.*, 206.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*

Gaddis later, is critical towards such tendencies; the wording of his criticism directly reflects back on what exactly is gained and lost by rationalisation and subjectivity: the perspectival conception of space, he writes, “seems to reduce the divine to a mere content of human consciousness, but at the same time it broadens human knowledge to the point of making it capable of taking in and containing within itself the divine”.³⁶⁴ God’s “absolute sight” is devoured by human consciousness. It is Mephistopheles in Marlowe’s play who notes that hell is a state of mind. And it was philosophers such as Derrida and Adorno who had to remind us that the conditions set by Descartes and German Idealism, the supreme reign the mind, reason, and self, could easily turn into a “devouring rage at all that is different”.³⁶⁵ If consciousness becomes a pitfall, however, perspective becomes another. The human point of view devours the divine gaze, but if we brush this notion against the grain we cannot help but notice that linear perspective, creating a point of view, simultaneously binds the beholder of a painting to this point, and thereby limits recognition.

Such implications are made explicit in Gaddis’s treatment of the Bosch tabletop and strongly related to epistemological questions negotiated in Wyatt’s aesthetic of ‘recognition’. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, Gaddis does not only use the Flemish Primitives in order to exemplify the latter but also Cubist paintings. Most pointedly, Wyatt experiences a quasi-epiphany on seeing Picasso’s ‘Night Fishing in Antibes’ (see Fig. 2). In order to elucidate the painting’s appeal to him, I briefly discuss the significance of space and perspective in Cubist painting. Space became a major pictorial obsession for Cubist artists like Braque, Gris, and Picasso.³⁶⁶ For Braque, the “areas of empty space, what one might call the ‘Renaissance vacuum’, became as important as the subjects themselves”;³⁶⁷ there is a growing awareness not only of spaces within the painting but also the space between painting and spectator.

The altered concept of space highlighted in Cubism is caused by a different approach to perspective. Renaissance perspective “makes the single eye the centre of the visible world. Everything converges on to the eye as to the vanishing point of infinity. The visible world is arranged for the spectator as the universe was once

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 207.

³⁶⁵ Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*, 187.

³⁶⁶ John Golding, “Cubism”, in *Concepts of Modern Art: From Fauvism to Postmodernism*, ed. Nikos Stangos, 3rd ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 57.

³⁶⁷ Golding, “Cubism”, 57.

thought to be arranged for God”.³⁶⁸ Cubism, as a formalistic art, concerned with the re-appraisal and re-invention of pictorial procedures and values,³⁶⁹ attempted emancipation from visual experiences, which resulted in artworks simultaneously representational and anti-naturalistic.³⁷⁰ Ever since the “Italian Renaissance artists had been guided by principles of mathematical perspective, whereby artist viewed subject from single viewpoint”; the breaks with this traditional perspective in Cubism “was to result [...] in what contemporary critics called ‘simultaneous’ vision – the fusion of various views of a figure or object into a single one.”³⁷¹ For the Cubists, accordingly, “the visible was no longer what confronted the single eye, but the totality of possible views taken from points all around the object (or person) being depicted.”³⁷² The French painter Jean Metzinger described this in his “Note on Painting” (1910) as the “abandonment of the burdensome inheritance of dogma; [...] the clever mixing, again and again, of the successive and the simultaneous”.³⁷³

Gaddis himself is very close to this aesthetic in his technique of deliberate fragmentation, repetition, variation, indirection, and apophaticism. Influenced by Nietzsche and Hans Vaihinger, he asserts that “things don’t happen [...] in a single light”, because “the instant a thing happens it has happened, and when it has happened it has happened in a thousand ways none of which alone is true”.³⁷⁴ He thereby confirms Jacques Rivière’s renunciation of perspective:

[p]erspective is an accidental thing as lighting. It is the sign, not of a particular moment in time, but of a particular position in space. It indicates not the situation of the objects, but the situation of the spectator.³⁷⁵

What Wyatt tries to achieve in his forgeries is similar; like Cubism, however, without contradictions.³⁷⁶ Wyatt, for instance, lauds one of his forgeries as follows:

³⁶⁸ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972), 16.

³⁶⁹ Golding, “Cubism”, 51.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 54.

³⁷² Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 18.

³⁷³ Cited in Harrison and Wood, *Art in Theory*, 178.

³⁷⁴ Alberts, “Mapping William Gaddis”, 19; cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals* (III, 12), and Hans Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of ‘As if’: A System of the Theoretical, Practical and Religious Fictions of Mankind*, trans. C. K. Ogden (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 355.

³⁷⁵ Cited in Harrison and Wood, *Art in Theory*, 185; cf. Knight, *Hints and Guesses*, 59.

³⁷⁶ Theoreticians of Abstract Expressionism such as Clement Greenberg criticised Cubism for failing “to see behind the disorder at heart of decline of bourgeois society” (Jachec, *The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism*, 24). More importantly, however, Greenberg holds, in “The Decline

Do you get the perspective in this [painting]? [...] There isn't any single perspective, like the camera eye, the one we all look through now and call it realism, there... I take five or six or ten... [...] even in a small painting you can't include it all in your single vision, your one miserable pair of eyes [...] (TR, 251)

Even if he might not be fully correct with his view on the perspective of Flemish painters, he has a point in stressing that art, in theory, is able to provide what is unattainable in life. The realism of one "miserable pair of eyes" is limited, and with a point of view come misrecognitions and contradictions. Even if things happen in more than one light, one cannot fully grasp them. If the fullness of life cannot be seized by man's limited capabilities, art can nevertheless mediate between the two:

—*Night Fishing in Antibes*, yes, yes... [...] when I saw it, it was one of those moments of reality, of near-recognition of reality. I'd been... I've been worn out in this piece of work, and when I finished in it I was free, free of all of a sudden out in the world. In the street everything was unfamiliar, everything and everyone I saw was unreal; I felt like I was going to lose my balance out there, this feeling was getting all knotted up inside me and I went in there just to stop for a minute. And then I saw this thing. When I saw it all of a sudden everything was freed into one recognition, really freed into reality that we never see, you never see. You don't see it in paintings because most of the time you can't see beyond a painting. [...] You can't see them any time, just any time, because you can't see freely very often, hardly ever, maybe seven times in a life. (TR, 91-2)

Ideal art is clarity and purity. As the account indicates, the revelation of truth by and the access of reality through art are rare, however, and it is even harder to produce such 'windows' to recognition. When Wyatt describes his work before bargaining with Brown he observes, not without bitterness:

How... how fragile situations are. [...] Why, all this around us is for people who can keep their balance only in the light, where they move as though nothing were fragile, nothing tempered by possibility, and all of a sudden bang! something breaks. Then you have to stop and put the pieces together again. But you never can put them back together quite the same

of Cubism" (1948): "Cubism originated not only from the art that preceded it, but also from a complex of attitudes that embodied the optimism, boldness, and self-confidence of the highest stage of industrial capitalism, [...] in which the scientific outlook had at last won a confirmation [...]. Cubism... expressed the positivist or empirical state of mind with its refusal to refer to anything outside the concrete experience of the particular discipline, field, or medium in which one worked; and it also expressed the empiricist's faith in the supreme reality of concrete experience" (cited in Harrison and Wood, *Art in Theory*, 571).

way. You stop when you can and expose things, and leave them within reach, and others come on by themselves, and they break, and even then you may put the pieces aside just out of reach until you can bring them back and show them, put together slightly different, maybe a little more enduring, until you've broken it and picked up the pieces enough times, and you have the whole thing in all its dimensions. But the discipline, the detail, it's just... sometimes the accumulation is too much to bear. (TR, 113-114)

Against the background of the anti-Romanticism of Wyatt's teacher Koppel, Heffernan sees a relation to Adorno's notion of genius here.³⁷⁷ As Adorno writes in *Aesthetic Theory*:

The genial remains paradoxical and precarious because the freely discovered and the necessary cannot actually ever be completely fused. Without the ever present possibility of failure there is nothing genial in artworks.³⁷⁸

Playing *advocatus diaboli*, I would argue that the reverse is not necessarily true: failure is no guarantee for genius. Even more so, if one considered Wyatt as a genius along these lines, one would have to apply the same to Stanley and Max. If one observes another of Adorno's coordinates of genius, one must admit that it holds true for all three artists working with palimpsests, bricolage and copying:

The genial is a dialectical knot: It is what has not been copied or repeated, it is free, yet at the same time bears the feeling of necessity; it is art's paradoxical sleight of hand and one of its most dependable criteria. To be genial means to hit upon a constellation, subjectively to achieve the objective, it an instant in which the methexis of the artwork in language allows convention to be discarded as accidental. The signature of the genial in art is that the new appears by virtue of its newness as if it had always been there [...]³⁷⁹

This holds true for all three artists, who create within the field between freedom and necessity something new that appears to have always been there. But genial or not, there are two contradictions as regards Wyatt's paintings. Firstly, they are wares, as he will come to learn, that is, the aesthetic category is invariably subordinate to that of market values. What therefore comes to mind is Adorno and Horkheimer's dictum that "[p]ure works of art which deny the commodity society by the very fact that they

³⁷⁷ Heffernan, "The Recognitions by William Gaddis", 82-3.

³⁷⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 225.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

obey their own law were always wares all the same”.³⁸⁰ Newness is only relevant in the context of Wyatt’s paintings insofar as new goods are demanded by the market, just as the profusion of minute details in his paintings adds to their “ability to return a generous profit”.³⁸¹ The second aspect is that the function Wyatt attributes to his art is the reestablishment of a lost *modus operandi* with distinctly social and metaphysical implications as represented by the ‘alchemy’ of the Flemish Primitives. In the following I will therefore discuss what it means for Wyatt to have “taken the Guild oath [...], to use pure materials, to work in the sight of God” (TR, 250), to work beneath a few, grave, rigid laws, as it were (cf. TR, 186). Moreover, I will discuss why his restitution of both artistic and social perfection is an endeavour bound to fail.

4.2. Alchemy and Magic

What was valuable [in modernism] was the kind of art which mirrored a world in which you could recognize yourself. Quite *why* this is thought valuable is extremely hard to say. The answer probably has more to do with magic than aesthetics.
—Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*³⁸²

When Wyatt discovers that the Bosch tabletop he forged was the original, he exclaims: “Thank God there was the gold to forge” (TR, 689, 949), a line Gaddis wanted to be understood as the key to the novel.³⁸³ At this point, Wyatt’s Christian notion of redemption meets a second soteriological model, the alchemical making of gold.³⁸⁴ Since *al-kîmiyâ*, the holy art of producing gold and the *technê* of redemption,³⁸⁵ is so central to Wyatt’s soteriological agenda, a more detailed observation is in place. Moreover, negotiations of alchemy are an intrinsic element of

³⁸⁰ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London/ New York: Verso, 1997), 157 (hereafter cited in text as DE).

³⁸¹ Conway, “Failing Criticism”, 84.

³⁸² Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (London: Penguin, 2004), 66-67.

³⁸³ Zoltán Abádi-Nagy, “The Art of Fiction: An Interview with William Gaddis”, *Paris Review* 105 (1987): 79-80.

³⁸⁴ See, in this context, John Leverage’s discussion of Wyatt’s alchemy in „Gaddis Anagnorisis”, in *In Recognition of William Gaddis*, ed. John Kuehl and Steven Moore (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1984), 39-44.

³⁸⁵ See Sven S. Hartmann, “Alchemie I”, in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, Vol. 2, ed. Gerhard Krause and Gerhard Müller (Berlin; de Gruyter, 1978), 195, 197. Jung’s ahistorical interpretation of alchemy, used as a reference point in Peter Wolfe’s monograph, has been rejected in almost all academic fields; cf. György E. Szöni, “The Reincarnations of the Magus: Alchemy, John Dee, and Magic in Some Postmodern Historical Metafiction”, in *Fantastic Body Transformations in English Literature*, ed. Sabine Coelsch-Foisner. (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 2006), 49.

the Faust myth. Not only does Faust ‘speculate the elements’, as Mann puts it; the myth frequently ridicules the confusion between gold as a spiritual category and as a commodity. Marlowe’s Faustus intends to heap up gold, Andreae’s *Turbo* ridicules alchemical money-making, and Goethe, whose drama features pervasive association of monetary with ‘phallic’ power, has his Margarete say: “Gold’s all they care/ About, gold’s wanted everywhere” (F, 2802-3). Gaddis follows suit in this respect by using the theme in order to satirise modern scientism and materialism.

Historically, alchemy is far from a homogenous category but comprises Gnostic and Neoplatonic ideas. It has been categorised as an *astronomia inferior* with relations to the Cabbala, and is also found under the labels of pansophism, theosophy and the *ars hermetica*. Since the Middle Ages alchemy has been categorised as *physica* as well as *scientia theoretica*, but also assigned to the *scientiae practicae*. Roger Bacon differentiates between *alchemica speculativa* and *alchemica practica*; for him the *alchimicus* is a *philosopus* and an *artifex*.³⁸⁶ Paracelsus then demarcates the change from traditional alchemy to iatrochemistry (medical chemistry).³⁸⁷ Moreover, in Paracelsian thought alchemy becomes a *philosophia mystica* in conjunction with theosophy. Central to alchemy is the *ars transmutatoria* or *chrysopoeia*. The alchemist is the artist (*artifex*) who brings nature to perfection by means of the amelioration of metals in an operation of several stages. The underlying notion is that everything in nature aspires to perfection, that is, all metals continually strive to become gold. The alchemists distinguish between the *aurum nostrum* and vulgar gold.³⁸⁸ There is much obscurity involved in the former kind, but the *Rosarium Philosophorum*, for instance, is at the same time quite clear that the colour of the human soul is *red*.³⁸⁹ The alchemists believed in the finality of nature: if nothing “impedes the process of gestation, all ores will, in time, become gold”.³⁹⁰ Metals that had remained imperfect were to be transmuted into gold with the aid of the *lapis*

³⁸⁶ Joachim Telle, “Alchemie II. Historisch”, in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. 2, ed. Gerhard Krause and Gerhard Müller (Berlin; de Gruyter, 1978), 199.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 204.

³⁸⁸ See Joachim Telle, ed. *Rosarium Philosophorum: Ein alchemistisches Florelegium des Spätmittelalters, Faksimile der illustrierten Erstaussgabe, Frankfurt 1550*, vol. 2, trans. Lutz Claren and Joachim Huber (Weinheim: VCH, 1992), 63.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 156. Gold production had a long-standing religious tradition in Egypt, and the immutability of the metal was a symbol for the persistence of the soul after death; cf. Manfred Lurker, *Symbole der alten Ägypter: Einführung und kleines Wörterbuch* (Weilheim: O.W. Barth, 1964), 56. The notion of a golden human soul occurs often in systems comprising eschatological concepts and micro-macrocosmic relations, for instance in the Iranian myth of Gayômart (Hartmann, “Alchemie I”, 197).

³⁹⁰ Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible: The Origins and Structures of Alchemy*, trans. Stephen Corrin (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 50.

philosophorum,³⁹¹ and books like the *Aurea catena Homeri* (1723) provided hermetic explanations of nature including recipes for the production of the lapis.³⁹² Assuming the place of the Earth-Mother, the artifex accelerates the process of perfection in his opus, which is aimed at producing the Philosopher's Stone, or the Elixir, with which matter is turned into gold. Arnold of Villanova wrote "there abides in Nature a certain pure matter which, being discovered and brought by Art to perfection, converts to itself all imperfect bodies that it touches."³⁹³ The Philosopher's Stone completes and consummates the work of nature, but it also gives expression to an "old dream of *homo faber*: collaboration in the perfecting of matter while at the same time securing perfection for himself."³⁹⁴ Transmuting nature means also the transmutation of man.

Gaddis considerably draws from such notions, firstly to satirise cold scientific rationality and materialism, and secondly, suggesting, like Mann, that alchemy is not "just making gold" (TR, 129), but also a modus of self-redemption. Even if Gaddis depicts the alchemists as fools and 'cronies', he remains ambivalent. Paracelsus is mentioned, Raymond Lully, and Michael Maier (TR, 77, 131, 132), with some sense of pity as victims of the Enlightenment and materialism, but also with some sense of admiration. For the alchemists, nature is a hierophany (religion and alchemy were not mutually exclusive from the point of view of the alchemist). In modernity, as Eliade writes, the "visionary's myth of the perfection, [...] of the redemption of Nature, survives, in camouflaged form, in the pathetic programme of the industrial societies whose aim is the total transmutation of nature" into something that is feasible, consumable, sellable.³⁹⁵ This is the greed of Marlowe's Faustus "Heap up gold,/ And be eternised from some wondrous cure".³⁹⁶ Instead of aspiring perfection, Faustus is tempted by power, and he aspires possession, excited by the prospect to exploit "all the wealth our forefathers hid/ Within the massy entrails of the earth".³⁹⁷ This is also the "repetitive drudgery" of modern technology as compared to the "hard and honourable work" of magic, Pynchon describes in his introduction to Jim Dodge's

³⁹¹ Telle, "Alchemie II", 200.

³⁹² *Ibid.*, 205.

³⁹³ Cited in *ibid.*, 166.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 169.

³⁹⁵ Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible*, 172.

³⁹⁶ Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, 1.1.14-15

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.1.139-41.

novel *Stone Junction*.³⁹⁸ Purely positivistic science falls under the same category in *The Recognitions*:

Science in magnitude, biology and chemistry as triumphantly articulate as subordinates are always, offer no choice but abjure it in frantic effort to perfect a system without alternatives, the very fact of their science based on measurement; and measurement, designed to predicate finalities, refusing the truth which shelters in possibility [...] (TR, 469)

Materialism and science reduce the world to an either/or, they pose as the new Christ in the state of the player piano described in *Agapē Agape*. Not incidentally, the frenzy of invention and perfection goes hand in hand with “art without the artist” (AA, 9), for either/or-artificiality is substituted for artistic potentiality. The world of Mr. Pivner, Otto’s father, is the epitome of such reductionism:

[I]n the foremost shambles of time Mr. Pivner stood, heir to that colossus of self-justification, Reason, one of whose first accomplishments was to effectively sever itself from the [...] chaos of the past. Obtruding over centuries of gestation appeared this triumphal abortion: Reason supplied means and eliminated ends. (TR, 290)

However, one reads, the “means themselves had become an end constantly unfulfilled” (TR, 291). Gaddis, in his ironic allusiveness, undermines the reduction of perfection to pure materialism, as the following lines exemplify:

Zosimus, Albertus Magnus, Geber, Bernhardus, Trevisanus, Basilius Valentinus, Raymond Lully, Khalid ben Yezid, Hermes Trismegistus, have they been transcended by our achievements? For today (at a cost of \$10,000 an ounce) it is possible to transmute base metal into gold. (TR, 131)

Considering that the average price of an ounce of gold in 1950 was \$ 40, the absurdity of such scientism is obvious. Most ironic allusions to alchemy in this manner refer to Otto, Wyatt’s ‘famulus’, who is presented as an exemplary case of the pitfalls of materialism, that is, of making the ‘lesser gold’.³⁹⁹ Otto understands gold as follows:

³⁹⁸Thomas Pynchon, “Introduction”, in *Stone Junction: An Alchemical Pot Boiler*, by Jim Dodge (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2004), ix, x.

³⁹⁹Otto, for instance, smokes “MacDonald’s Gold Standard” (TR, 154) cigarettes, which he lights with a fake-gold lighter that has to be dipped in gold paint now and then.

Coined or in heavy bars, or exquisite dust it came into his mind, to be fashioned in that busy workshop in less time than it takes to tell (for it was more an assembly line than a manufactory) into cuff links, cigarette cases, and other mass-produced artifacts of the world he lived in, mementos of this world, in which the things worth being were so easily exchanged for the things worth having. (TR, 131)

In the alchemical continuum, materialism is represented by two connected symbols in *The Recognitions*, the colour green and base matter. Green is associated in alchemical symbolism with Venus or the Green Lion that represents the still immature matter in the alembic, a description not unfit for the adept Otto.⁴⁰⁰ Gaddis employs the colour adjective in its full polysemy. As a property of paper money, it signifies a degraded state of gold, a counter-image to perfection, as provided in Otto's quest for money. Otto does not aspire redemption but thinks of reality as "the things you can't do anything about" (TR, 119). All he wants is to acquire wealth and renown. He, who feels intrinsically undefined (TR, 129), a *massa confusa* often associated with faeces (TR, 203, 466), is reliant on the greenback, the lesser gold (cf. TR, 520). As Pynchon will later write in *Gravity's Rainbow*: "Shit, money, and the Word, the three American truths" (GR, 28). Gaddis returns to this trinity in *JR*, where annual school budgets foresee only twelve hundred dollars for books but twelve thousand for paper towels (JR, 25). As one of the characters of the novel holds, this is "what America's all about, waste disposal and all" (JR, 27). In Otto's case, the 'modern device' of money fails, melts into air, when he mistakenly comes into possession of five thousand fake ("queer") dollars that initiate his ruin.⁴⁰¹

The second, related image is that of base matter. In redeeming such matter, represented by Brown, Wyatt intends to redeem art, but also sets up an "alchemical paradigm that acts as a touchstone for the redemption of his soul".⁴⁰²

⁴⁰⁰ Abraham Lyndy, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 45, 91.

⁴⁰¹ See John Seelye, "Dryad in a Dead Oak Tree. The Incognito in *The Recognitions*", in *In Recognition of William Gaddis*, ed. John Kuehl and Steven Moore (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1984), 72-73.

⁴⁰² Safer, "Ironic Allusiveness", 85.

4.3. Fractures

The *inquisitio lapidis philosophorum* (search for the Stone) is often the symbolic expression of the pilgrimage to Christ. In order to be purified, matter has to undergo dissolution. This ‘deadening’, as Eliade notes, “was sanctified by the death of Christ who assured its redemption”.⁴⁰³ The alchemists

projected on to Matter the initiatory function of suffering. Thanks to the alchemical operations, corresponding to the tortures, death and resurrection of the initiate, the substance is transmuted, that is, attains a transcendental [sic] mode of being: it becomes gold.⁴⁰⁴

Wyatt experiences the association of art and suffering from his infancy onward, be it in Aunt May’s domain, where original art is sinful and Christians “approve of the suffering of another” (TR, 47), or his literal suffering via the loss of his mother. As an adult, he admires the stringency of suffering in flamenco music, its arrogance, its precision, and its lack of sentimentality:

These things have their own patterns, suffering and violence, [...] the sense of violence within its own pattern, the pattern that belongs to violence like the bullfight, that’s why the bullfight is art, because it respects its own pattern [...] (TR, 112)

Ironically, the Spanish *flamenco* means ‘Flemish’ (TR, 111), and someone even describes Wyatt as “muy flamenco” (TR, 110). Although for Wyatt the precision and privacy of suffering (TR, 116) is opposed to public capitalised *Suffering* (TR, 943-44), his apotheosis is equally on the verge of hypostasising the concept.⁴⁰⁵ Wyatt projects his suffering on art as the alchemists did.⁴⁰⁶ When he follows an “aesthetic of disciplined agony”,⁴⁰⁷ he sees himself in direct opposition to the romantic notion of

⁴⁰³ Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible*, 157. The lapis itself was considered to be of three components not unfamiliar to the Christian: *corpus, anima, spiritus* parallel the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁴⁰⁵ Moreover, Gaddis has a too inflationary amount of characters express admiration for ‘authentic’ suffering (TR, 386, 530, 577, 601, 652) to grant the prerogative of real authenticity to the protagonist, which ultimately deflates the concept.

⁴⁰⁶ The connecting element of his forging of gold is again Christ. Much of Flemish Renaissance art relates to the death of Jesus, the gloomy predominance of the cross as described by Huizinga. Anthony Levy notes in this context that the “sacrificial death of Jesus, rather than the incarnation, became in the popular mind, the essence of his redemptive act”. Anthony Levy, *Renaissance and Reformation* (New Haven/London, Yale University Press, 2002), 134.

⁴⁰⁷ Salemi, “To Soar in Atonement”, 49.

the genius, namely as the servant of art,⁴⁰⁸ in that “where he celebrates the contingent objectivity of artistic technique as opposed to the pitfalls of romantic subjectivism”.⁴⁰⁹ Art, consequently, becomes for him an objective correlative to “expiation” (TR, 591) and automatically gains moral value. Instead of rendering his struggle into expression, however, he substitutes idolatrous martyrdom for his own suffering, which is ultimately a hubristic gesture. Rather than bearing the fragile situations he describes, rather than living with and within disruptions, which would make him a genius in Adorno’s sense, he reverts to religious doxa disguised in alchemical formulas, and despite his rhetoric he evades the problem of how art can be morally transformative under the capitalist paradigm but merely propounds to work in the sight of God. The enlightened self reverts to the myth of the martyr as a hero, “who serves something higher than himself with undying devotion” (TR, 32). However, he devotes himself to the guild and the masters because they are also ideal projection screens, and imitating them allows for an indulgence in religious idolatry and self-pity posing as self-abnegation. Moreover, while the alchemical reading suggests itself in this context—“the alchemist takes up and perfects the work of Nature, while at the same time working to ‘make’ himself”—,⁴¹⁰ so does the Protestant notion of service. When Wyatt rants “What is it they want from a man that they didn’t get from his work? What do they expect? What is there left of him when he’s done his work?” (TR, 95), such opinions certainly address the interrelation between personality cult and commoditisation, that is, stardom in the service of commerce. However, they equally serve Wyatt as a justification for forfeiting his own personality. Rather than attempting to develop a social mode of existence that comprises connectedness and meaningfulness, Wyatt’s counter-socialised personality draws its entire sense of self from the *opus*. In this respect, there is no difference between the artifex working in the sight of God and the Puritan in his calling. Gaddis leaves no doubt that this is a deluded endeavour. If Wyatt’s frequent self-description as a homunculus in a shell and the fact that the forger is referred to merely by means of the personal pronoun throughout the entire mid-section of the novel were not indicative enough, the painter’s resorting to alcoholism in order to emulate van der Goes’s madness is. Adorno writes that those “who produce important artworks are not demigods but

⁴⁰⁸ Ingendaay, *Die Romane*, 3.

⁴⁰⁹ Heffernan, “*The Recognitions* by William Gaddis”, 82.

⁴¹⁰ Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible*, 47.

fallible, often neurotic and damaged, individuals” – and the more damaged Wyatt, the better his forgeries.⁴¹¹ Thus, while in Mann infection enables grandeur, in Gaddis one has the impression that delusion is sought as a necessary predisposition of the latter: simulated disease, simulated genius. Moreover, Wyatt’s alchemy, as I show in the following, is co-opted by a magic of a different kind.

In the context of evaluating artworks and reproduction, it has become customary to refer to Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, an essay Gaddis was acquainted with, and to differentiate between an aura of authenticity with a unique value (ritual value) that is then lost or superseded by a discursively constructed value (exhibition value).⁴¹² In *The Recognitions*, however, such distinctions are problematical. First of all, Wyatt does not mechanically-soullessly reproduce paintings but he creates ‘genuine’ paintings by emulating the conditions necessary for the establishment of ‘authenticity’. He carefully selects his pigments, the oil, or the eggs for gesso; but, more crucially, he becomes van der Goes (even to the point of simulating van der Goes’s madness). Deluding himself into indebtedness to both God and the Guild of Dutch Masters, he is able to forge what Benjamin calls the ritual value perceivable in the artwork’s aura.⁴¹³ He can thereby belie himself and the taste of his times: “Most forgeries last only a few generations, because they’re so carefully done in the taste of the period, a forged Rembrandt, for instance, confirms everything that that period sees in Rembrandt” (TR, 230). The produced aura, however, is only possible in complicity with the exhibition-value, the art-dealers who ‘deaden’ the work and sell it, for no matter what kind of painting we see, the forgery of van Eyck or van der Goes or an original by Picasso, what remains qua aesthetics is a vague feeling of recognition that needs verbal affirmation as an external signifier of the *certitudo salutis*. The devil himself, Brown, explains how the market works: “Nobody wants copies. [...] The ones who can pay want originals. They can pay for

⁴¹¹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 225.

⁴¹² Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al. (London/ Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 24-25.

⁴¹³ There are also intrinsic problems in applying Benjamin to Gaddis. Firstly, Benjamin’s assessment that the politicisation of aesthetics and aestheticisation of politics are two distinct movements is rarely upheld in art theory anymore (cf. Mann, *Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde*, 48). Furthermore, Benjamin’s antithesis between the auratic and the mass-reproduced work has been contested, “which for the sake of simplicity neglected the dialectic between the two types” (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 72). In a very simple manner Wyatt’s works are in the fullest sense what Adorno calls art: “By its difference from empirical reality the artwork necessarily constitutes itself in relation to what is not, and to what it makes it an artwork in the first place” (*ibid.*, 11).

originals. They expect to pay” (TR, 145). Why do Brown’s customers care for old masters when so many “hip” modern paintings are available? Firstly, they “can pay” and “expect to pay”, that is, they want artworks to be obvious signifiers of their wealth, taking age and veneration as sufficiently obvious characteristics. Forging, it is implied, does not primarily serve aesthetic functions but satisfies, however momentarily, the desire of accretion: “When the Roman Republic collapsed, art collecting collapsed, art forging disappeared. [...] Instead of art they had religion” (TR, 245). Gaddis insinuates here that the fundamental principles of such an economy are identical to those involved in concepts of sin and indulgence, pilgrimage and religious relics. Secondly, if Brown’s art customers are of the same kind as those who buy his chalk toothpaste, the chemical women use for their menstrual periods, and the crucifixes, then they want affirmation rather than rupture. The inversion of discourse, the buyer’s “shame and secrecy” (TR, 243), traits that Gaddis identifies as intrinsically Puritan, enable the sale. The reified artwork, whose discovery is documented in newspapers,⁴¹⁴ whose authenticity is certified in art magazines, and whose display in Brown’s private gallery document its reification as a genuine article, cannot be unsettling because it does not speak anymore. The “Age of Publicity” (TR, 736) having superseded the ages of faith and reason, the artwork itself is deadened. As Basil Valentine holds:

—There is always an immense congregation of people unable to create anything themselves, who look for comfort to the critics to disparage, belittle, and explain away those who do. (TR, 651)

Such power is conditioned, as argued, by the impossibility of distinguishing between original and copy, between work and reproduction on a phenomenological basis. Valentine confirms that only solid knowledge of the origins of an artwork or credulity makes the distinction: “If the public believes that a picture is by Raphael, and will pay the price of a Raphael, [...] then it is a Raphael” (TR, 239). Against this background,

⁴¹⁴ There is a decidedly political dimension to the “discovery” of some of the forgeries: “An original Memling, right from Germany. A guy I know in the army there, this thing has been marked down as lost on the reparations claims” (TR, 231). It also transpires that “Hungary was attempting to sell in the West masterpieces from Budapest’s National Art Gallery. [...] The informants said that some of the paintings were being shipped to the United States as diplomatic luggage in the hope of interesting American art collectors” (TR, 329-30). A severe implication of this is that American cultural life thrives on the European catastrophe.

it is doubtful that Gaddis was naïve enough to suggest, as Lisa Siraganian holds, that a fake painting “cannot rely on its integrity to compel conviction in order to sell itself, and so must by definition rely on an outside economy: the economy of the critic and art buyer”- while the original does not.⁴¹⁵ The paradigms Gaddis develops from Huizinga acknowledges that “Medieval Christian art would have been unthinkable without an iconographic and institutionally mandated and mediated discursive space (the church itself, an ideological as well as an architectural site)” – religious rhetoric serves as the discursive space for Wyatt and Stanley – but also that in “romantic and modern art [...] the demand for originality obscured the necessity of discursive precedence”.⁴¹⁶ In terms of reception, the shallow partygoers serve their purpose in lauding Max Schling’s colours and the emptiness of his paintings. The work itself has become “a fully discursive phenomenon”.⁴¹⁷ “The origin of the artist is the work of art, the origin of the work of art is the artist”, states Jacques Derrida, reiterating Heidegger.⁴¹⁸ In *The Recognitions* both art and artist exist by virtue but also at the mercy of salesmen and public relations. Brown and Valentine do and undo. They are the real creative agents, so powerful they can literally create a painter, for instance Jan van Eyck’s brother: “—What are you talking about? Brown demanded. —We decided he exists, this Herbert [sic]” (TR, 255).⁴¹⁹ This manoeuvre reflects the performative trick of Faust’s Bible translation in all respects, the search for an ‘absent God’ in signs (the text of the Gospel) and the substitution of the word with action. Eventually, it is a seizure of authority for the sake of one’s own interests—a feat not only Valentine and Brown but also Pynchon’s Mephistophelian characters also capitalise on.⁴²⁰ Against the background of such creation *ex nihilo*, it is no wonder that Wyatt’s alchemical credo that the work is everything and the artifex nothing acquires an unintentionally cynical quality.⁴²¹

⁴¹⁵ Siraganian, ““A disciplined nostalgia””, 107.

⁴¹⁶ Mann, *Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde*, 5.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 31-32.

⁴¹⁹ Symptomatically, Recktall Brown keeps on calling Jan van Eyck’s brother, whose existence is still debated, Herbert instead of Hubert (TR, 255, 256, 257, 362, 365).

⁴²⁰ The trope of such performative acts is frequent in Pynchon. In *V.*, Herbert Stencil creates an object via his paranoid concoctions (see my chapter 6). In *Gravity’s Rainbow* the ‘power of naming’ is not only found in the trickster Säure Bummer, who transforms Slothrop into a mock hero, but also in a more insidious way in the Puritan settlers on Mauritius, who pursue genocidal activities based on their hubristic claim to scriptural authority (cf. my chapter 7 and my discussion of Voegelin in chapter 2).

⁴²¹ Ironically, even though he erases himself by subscribing to the authority invested in the Flemish Primitives, a kernel of him remains. On seeing Wyatt’s pseudo-van Eyck painting *The Annunciation*,

To summarise, Wyatt's Faustian delusion may be presented as parody in *The Recognitions*, but it has serious implications. Firstly, he does not take into consideration what has been formulated by Oteiza: "A man can repeat himself, but a generation, and therefore art itself, can never be repeated".⁴²² Since the world of the Flemish Primitives cannot be recaptured, Wyatt, as a forger, continues his previous job as a restorer by "patching up the past" (TR, 142-44). Secondly, as Agamben has observed, "the authority invoked by the quotation is founded precisely on the destruction of the authority that is attributed to a certain text by its situation in the history of culture".⁴²³ Wyatt quotes from other paintings insofar as he copies parts from various paintings to assemble them, together with a minimal remainder of himself (the encystation of his desire for Camilla), to something "new". In doing so, however, he undermines the authority of the Flemish Primitives he allegedly cherishes. The destruction of the authority represented in van Eyck and van der Goes is nowhere clearer than in Wyatt's 'quotations' that are used for the spiritual market. Moreover, by inscribing the authority of the Flemish Painters to himself, he also devalues his own artistic abilities. The latter leads to an aspect described by Bourdieu:

The world of art, a sacred island systematically and ostentatiously opposed to the profane, everyday world of production, a sanctuary for gratuitous, disinterested activity in a universe given over to money and self-interest, offers, like theology in a past epoch, an imaginary anthropology obtained by denial of all negations really brought about by the economy.⁴²⁴

Therefore, in feeding back the Flemish masters into the economy, Wyatt follows what John Berger calls "bogus religiosity".⁴²⁵ Locating moral energy in saleable objects, he produces art-indulgences,⁴²⁶ and believing in art as transformative practice, he is all the more, in Adorno's terms, self-deceptive.⁴²⁷ Thus, forgery in *The Recognitions* also means a waste of talent, the talent of being oneself and the talent of perfecting one's

for instance, the art critic Basil Valentine exclaims: "It's exquisite, this face, the reproach, like the faces, the Virgin in other things you've done, the reproach in this face. Your work, it's old isn't it, but a little always shows through, yes something, *semper aliquid haeret?* something always remains, something of you" (TR, 336).

⁴²² Oteiza, "Letter to the Artists of America", 85.

⁴²³ Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, 104.

⁴²⁴ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 197.

⁴²⁵ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 21.

⁴²⁶ Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Santa Monica: Lapis Press, 1986), 87-88.

⁴²⁷ See Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*, 213.

own work and style. The notion of the ‘self who can do more’ here takes on a different meaning. Wyatt, despite some glorifying statements by other characters (or literary critics, for that matter), is neither the better *self* of a community of artists nor does he produce the significance he wishes to achieve. Going into hiding in his alchemical workshop and labouring until he is drained of himself, he conceives of his part of the deal as the opus, making “gold down there, out of fingernail parings” (TR, 173), as another character ironically observes. But even if he convincingly frames himself by thinking that he can produce art outside the commodity system, he is no better craftsman than Mr. Feddle, who restricts himself to forging signatures by Melville and Dostoevsky, neither is he morally superior to the bricoleur Max Schling. By signing the paintings as a second maker, he forges the *signum* in an environment where *Nihil cavum neque sine signo apud Deum* has to make do without the Divine. But what remains is the realisation that his enterprise has always been about the ‘lesser gold’ and his forging an act of solely legal significance:

—That’s the only thing they can prosecute you for in court, you know, if you’re caught. Forging the signature. The law doesn’t care a damn for the painting. (TR, 251)

The framework has become a way to frame, to con oneself.

5. Attempts at Redemption

According to the principle by which it is only in the burning house that the fundamental architectural problem becomes visible for the first time, art, at the furthest point of its destiny, makes visible its original project.

—Giorgio Agamben, *The Man without Content*⁴²⁸

When Spies’ Faust is starting to have second thought about his allegiance, the demon coerces him into renew the contract with the devil. Although Wyatt eventually breaks free from his delusion, he does so not without being tempted by other dubious modes of salvation and will undergo yet further transformations without, as it seems, ever arriving at a definitive sense of being redeemed.

⁴²⁸ Agamben, *The Man without Content*, 115.

5.1. Hastening Towards Destruction

Wyatt realises that there is no salvation to be found in forgery and sets out to destroy all that is false. Gaddis, again, makes a Pseudo-Clemente epigraph available as an ironic comment on this turn of events, when Wyatt wants to break free from his business partners and seeks refuge at his father's house (TR, 434):

This is as if a drunk man should think himself to be sober, and should act indeed in all respects as a drunk man, and yet think himself to be sober, and should wish to be called so by others. Thus, therefore, are those also who do not know what is true, yet hold some appearance of knowledge, and do many evil things as if they were good, and hasten destruction as if it were to salvation. (CR, 305-6)

The first irony involved in this soteriological warning is that it presents a deadlock: since the drunk does not know when he is drunk, he can hardly be sure if he is not deluded in judging Christian salvation the right approach.⁴²⁹ Gaddis expounds this trope by literalising the metaphor in presenting his major characters as drunkards.⁴³⁰ On a less blatant level this state of drunkenness is strongly associated with a Leviathan world, a society corrupted to the bone. More substantially, intoxication is an indicator of Wyatt's soteriological confusion and his attempted homecoming in the subsequent chapter, for when he flees from his infernal partners towards salvation, he merely exchanges one form of destruction for another. Returning to his father, Wyatt attempts to be a prodigal son and atone for his crimes by becoming a "priest". His Catholic slip of tongue is placed quite intentionally as an indicator questioning the soberness of his intention to become a minister (cf. TR, 413). His intended *metanoia*, away from the start, quickly turns into a matter of life and death.⁴³¹ Wyatt, hitherto gaily confusing Charles Fort's *Book of the Damned* and Anselm of Canterbury's

⁴²⁹ The trope of drunkenness is also common in documents of Valentinian speculation and other branches of Gnosticism. Jonas, for instance, discusses a Mandaean text in which intoxication is aimed at deafening man to the voice of the alien god (*The Gnostic Religion*, 73).

⁴³⁰ When the Reverend Gwyon is said to practice Mithridatism, this pun anticipates his turn to Mithraism, but it also alludes to Mithridates of Pontus who tried to immunise himself against poison by taking increasingly strong doses of it. In the reverend's case this poison is schnapps, which he hides in a cavity "cut ruthlessly out of *The Dark Night of the Soul*" (TR, 23, 415).

⁴³¹ Ironically, Wyatt is systematically misrecognised in this chapter. As LaCapra notes, "When he returns after years away from home, in a serio-parodic Second Coming, he is misrecognised by those remaining: for the Town Carpenter, he is Prester John; for the housemaid Janet, he is Christ himself; for his father, he is apparently a Mithraic messenger; and he introduces himself to the ladies of the Use-Me Society as the Reverend Gilbert Sullivan" ("Singed Phoenix and Gift of Tongues", 38). It seems where everybody is preoccupied with salvation, literally drunk yearning for redemption, humans have turned their eyes from each other and recognition of the actual state of affairs has become impossible.

credo ut intelligam (“What I mean is, do we believe in order to understand? Or understand in order to be... be fished for”: TR, 382), tries to muster the belief that he is the “man for whom Christ died” (TR, 440, cf. 127). He indicates to his father that he wants to shake off his own Adamic “old man” in order to become a “new self” (St. Paul’s Colossians 3:9-10 is invoked in two other key passages of the novel: Otto’s failed homecoming and Stephen’s final moments). Gwyon follows his son’s wish, guides him through the confessional part of repentance,⁴³² and then proposes to take his hope of killing the sinful self literally, for the Reverend, having long turned to Mithraism, wants to initiate him as a Mithraic priest. The initiation, it transpires, requires the adept to be killed: “No one can be reborn without dying. No one can be Mithras’ priest without being reborn” (TR, 432). Although the clash of Christian and syncretistic pagan soteriology leads Wyatt to identify himself with Christ and Gwyon to sacrifice a bull, such scenes do more than demonstrate the ludicrousness of both men’s pursuits: the effect of understanding religious metaphor in literal terms becomes destructive. When Wyatt realises that his attempt is bound to fail, he prepares to flee from his father’s parsonage, intending to commit himself to “damnation” and a “life without love” (TR, 442). “Yes, back there, that’s the place! They’re waiting! Yes, the harrowing of hell” (*ibid.*), he euphorically shouts before destroying the Bosch tabletop.⁴³³

5.2. Basil Valentine: The Lure of the Ivory Tower

Against his intentions, Wyatt soon changes his mind again and tries a second time to flee from all he perceives as evil. Eager to break free from his criminal past he has set his ‘alchemical’ workshop on fire with the unforeseen effect that the entire building burns down. Yet Wyatt thinks he can purchase absolution by revealing to the crowd of art critics at a ‘Walpurgisnacht’ party at Brown’s that the recently appeared masterpieces are sham by presenting their “charred fragments” (TR, 680). However, he does so in vain. At this point Valentine seizes the opportunity to tempt Wyatt with his own vision of salvation.

⁴³² Their conversation (TR, 430-32) represents the second part of Gaddis’s satiric version of the tripartite ritual of repentance (*contritio cordis, confessio oralis, satisfactio actis*).

⁴³³ It is a copy; Basil Valentine secretly had the original replaced and taken back to Europe (TR, 689).

In order to do so, he first exploits Wyatt's remorse while dismantling his idealisation of the Flemish Primitives. It is shown with a good deal of material from Huizinga that even in the Early Renaissance the oppositions between sacred and profane, between salvation through paintings and the satisfaction of self-interest with commodities could no longer be upheld, possibly because they have never been viable. When Valentine contests the spiritual import of Wyatt's role models, he pinpoints this discrepancy:

and you think it was different then? [...] In a world where everything was done for the same reasons everything's done now? For vanity and avarice and lust? [...] Yes, I remember your little talk, your insane upside-down apology for these pictures, every figure and every object with its own presence, its own consciousness because it was being looked at by God! Do you know what it was? What it really was? that everything was so afraid, so uncertain God saw it, that it insisted its vanity on His eyes? Fear, fear, pessimism and fear and depression everywhere, the way it is today, that's why your pictures are so cluttered with detail, this terror of emptiness, this absolute terror of space. Because maybe God isn't watching. [...] Separation, he said in a voice near a whisper, —all of it cluttered with separation, everything in its own vain shell, everything separate, withdrawn from everything else. Being looked at by God! Is there separation in God? (TR, 689-90)

As Valentine's tirade proceeds, criticising the circumstances of Renaissance art production, another Huizinga line is his basis:

Flanders in the fifteenth century, do you think it was all like the Adoration of the Mystic Lamb? [...] And your precious van Eyck, do you think he didn't live up to his neck in a loud vulgar court? [...] Do you think a van Eyck didn't curse having to whore away his genius [...]? (TR, 689-90).

The societal 'reality' behind the Flemish Primitives as Valentine presents them, then, is mildly shocking, and it appears that repellent circumstances of production and the prostitution of the artist are constants in art history.

Such criticism is by far not disinterested but embedded in a greater agenda. Valentine's sterile aesthetic represents the direct opposite to Brown's materialism, and it tempts Wyatt towards an extreme to which he himself has strong affinities, namely of leading a "life without love" (TR, 442) in the ivory tower of art. His drive

to ascetic aestheticism is concisely expressed in a portmanteau word with which Gaddis characterises Valentine:

Basil Valentine, who is the Gnostic presumption... is finally stricken down with insomnia, for his very refusal to realize and grant the worth of matter, that is, of other people. The essence of his gnosticism is largely an implacable hatred for matter. It is that element of asceticism [sic] common in so many religious expressions turned, not upon the self, but upon humanity. And it is his very inability to accomplish this hatred entirely, and to entirely refuse love (which he can only understand as power over the object loved, over all, in the theory in which he works; over Wyatt, who denies and escapes it himself...) that undoes him [...]⁴³⁴

A neurotic, Valentine must compulsively wash his hands out of discontent with matter. Repelled by the “wetness” of females (TR, 235) but attracted by the brittle, reproachful look of Wyatt’s *Stabat Mater* (TR, 336), he is certainly not *pro* creation. His association with what could be called the “lavender gang” controversially contributes to the image of the passionless, sterile inhabitant of the ivory tower.⁴³⁵ A less aesthetically refined example is represented in the visceral betrayal of his own body. His insomnia is presented as an effect of his joyless reason devouring itself, and the dampness he emits from his lower regions when affectionately talking to Wyatt (TR, 684) cynically undercuts his favourite line “semper aliquid haeret” (TR, 336).

Gaddis shows some empathy with the character. Valentine is pitifully aware of his shortcomings when he tells Wyatt that he knows that he hates people where the painter wishes he could love them (TR, 386), and his offer of asceticism, refinement and moderate homoeroticism (“the kind of thing that...it won’t be vulgar”: TR, 692) is proposed in sincere admiration of Wyatt. Such a benevolent perspective, however, ranks far behind harsher ones that cannot be fully categorised as satirical. Valentine, for whom “sophistication becomes an end in itself” far away from the plebs,⁴³⁶ does not only fall under the category of the Kantian man of taste accumulating cultural capital; he also follows the same elitist agenda identified by Andreas Huyssen as a distinct feature of male-centred modernism.⁴³⁷ Even more so, his attitude towards

⁴³⁴ Cited in Koenig, *Splinters*, 93.

⁴³⁵ If one can trust Gaddis’s play with themes and quotations, Valentine is part of the community of homosexuals in *The Recognitions*, in which he goes by the name of Val; cf. Seelye, “Dryard in a Dead Oak Tree”, 74-5.

⁴³⁶ Johnston, *Carnival*, 50.

⁴³⁷ Huyssen observes how discourse “around the turn of the century consistently and obsessively genders mass culture and the masses as feminine, while high culture, whether traditional or modern,

political power betrays, according to Steven Moore, the same reasoning that “lead Pound and Eliot [...] to favor authoritarian governments”.⁴³⁸ For the art critic, who holds that there “are so few beautiful things in the world [...] that they must be protected” (TR, 386):

any sanctuary of power. . . protects beautiful things. To keep people... to control people, to give them something... anything cheap that will satisfy them at the moment, to keep them away from beautiful things, to keep them where their hands can't touch beautiful things, their hands that... touch and defile and... and break beautiful things... (TR, 924)

Valentine's agenda appeals to Wyatt for both its asceticism and its authoritarian implications. Moreover, the critic's doctrine of lovelessness also finds recognition in the latter, who is neither able to maintain close relationship with his wife nor with his lover Esme.⁴³⁹ Eventually, Valentine also presents to Wyatt the notion of a 'self who can do more', as discussed in the previous chapter, albeit with an insidious twist. For Valentine, “this other... more beautiful self who... can do more than they can” is unreachable for the futile present-day “vulgar selves” (TR, 253). Rather than representing a mode of community and mutual inspiration, however, such self is an aristocratic ideal and a symptom of social separation.

In this respect, *The Recognitions* does leave any doubt that art for its own sake is not the solution to shortcomings as represented by the culture industry, a point that cannot be stressed enough. Gaddis even goes so far as to effectively demonize the homophile art critic. When Wyatt is about to turn from his partner in crime, the latter renews his offer of personal partnership and reveals what he considers to be the only secret “worth having”. This secret, for which G. B. Shaw's essay “The Perfect Wagnerite: A Commentary on the Nibelung's Ring” (1883) is the source, lies in the “power of doing without happiness” (TR, 552). Valentine then makes his final plea for the ivory tower, but Wyatt literally hands Valentine back this secret by stabbing him almost to death (TR, 692). When Brown's servant Fuller wants to help the

clearly remains the privileged realm of male activities”. Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 47. Gaddis substantiates such assumptions by having Wyatt accuse Esther of cherishing mass produced art and “devour” famous artists (TR, 95).

⁴³⁸ Steven Moore, *William Gaddis* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1989), 52.

⁴³⁹ For a discussion see Wolfe (*A Vision of His Own*, 110). His distance to Esther goes even so far as to respond to her almost physically repelled. Descriptions of her from Wyatt's perspective, for instance, are permeated with images of disease (TR, 118; cf. Moore, *William Gaddis*, 48).

wounded, he is warned: “But... no, don’t touch him. You never know what they may... have in their hair” (TR, 692). Wyatt suspects Valentine to grow horns on his head, that is to be of the devil’s party – not, however, the Christian devil, as LaCapra suggests,⁴⁴⁰ but of the devil of the Gnostics, the “depressingly sterile creator” Ialdabaoth, to use Žižek’s phrase.⁴⁴¹ No matter how violent Wyatt’s act may eventually be, he nevertheless identifies Valentine as what he is. When the former says “[t]his man is your father” (TR, 691), he does not only imply that the misanthrope is a human being and with that part of the material world but also that Valentine’s notion of art is as false as Brown’s. As Ingendaay argues, unable to kill the message of lovelessness, the painter tries to kill the messenger Valentine.⁴⁴² Just as Valentine survives, however, so does the message, and Wyatt will yet undertake more radical steps escape from it, finally opting for human social capabilities rather than preservation of art through seclusion from the social sphere.

5.3. A Parody of Gnostic Redemption

For agape [...] is a stranger to desire. Not being marked by privation, it has only one desire—to give—which is the expression of its generosity.

—Paul Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*⁴⁴³

[A] human being belongs to this earth, he should be fully at home on its surface, able to realize his potential through an active, productive exchange with it.

—Slavoj Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*⁴⁴⁴

The mirror of God’s eye is broken. Wyatt realises that a restitution of the view of the Flemish Primitives, their devotion to God’s unifying gaze, is as much idolatry as his own attempt to create redemptive art. He leaves New York, seemingly dismissing Panofsky’s second task of paradigm shifts, that is, the reassembly after the breakage. It is also at this point that the novel merges the narrative of *Faust* with that of the Clementine romance. Gaddis does so by alluding to Simon Magus’s soteriological

⁴⁴⁰ LaCapra, “Singed Phoenix and Gift of Tongues”, 36.

⁴⁴¹ Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (London/ New York: Routledge, 2001), 7. The suggestion is substantiated by Wyatt’s allegation that Valentine is Brown’s ‘son’ (TR, 691), for the latter represents “matter” and “evil only in the sense of depravity, of good fallen” (cf. Koenig, *Splinters*, 91).

⁴⁴² Ingendaay, *Die Romane*, 39-40.

⁴⁴³ Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, 224.

⁴⁴⁴ Žižek and Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 265.

story. Wyatt's turn is dramaturgically staged as an encounter with an inverted 'Helena', embracing the joy and vulgarity Valentine so detests. In Spain, he and Yák (Sinisterra) start a business as mummy forgers. Although he is alchemically 'reborn' as one Stephen, he is just as sinister as before: women cross themselves on seeing him and dogs bark at him in the street (TR, 784). Things brighten up, however, when the 'expatriate' Faust meets the 'lowest incarnation' of the fallen Gnostic wisdom in a cheap hotel in Madrid:

Look, what was that blonde I met in the hall?

Silence submits to the thud of an Ideal ash hitting the floor. [...] —Just what you say, a blonde. Forget her.

—But I don't even know her yet.

—So that saves you the trouble. You don't want to get mixed up with that flashy piece of goods. See? (TR, 796-97)

The "flashy piece" called Marga (who is soon to be supplemented by a brunette called Pastora), is not only identified as Helen by the colour of her hair here but by two strands of associations. Firstly, the brand of Sinisterra's cigarettes, *Ideal*, calls upon the canonical epithet of the ideal woman Helen of Troy. Secondly, after a vulgar outburst by Yák, Gaddis gives another hint:

Copulo ego sum, Eh? Carne, O te felicem!

And Mr Yák had shaken his head, and muttered something about "That flashy piece of goods down the hall," at which he was instantly threatened with blindness as happened to Stesichorus, —for slandering Helen. (TR, 800)⁴⁴⁵

The Marga-Pastora episode marks two obvious diversions from the Simonian account of redemption. The first one is that Stephen does not become godlike; the second is that instead of being a magus-redeemer, Stephen is redeemed by the two Spanish women. He appears increasingly sociable, and Marga teaches him Spanish, which he comments happily with "That's love" (TR, 802), but the positive effects of being with

⁴⁴⁵ The identification of the Gnostic Helena with Helen of Troy is a debated aspect of the Faust tradition (see Butler, *The Myth of the Magus*, 83). Nevertheless, as regards the conflation of the two figures in *The Recognitions*, an explanation can be gained by a chapter of one of Gaddis's sources, Irenaeus' *Adversus Hereses* (1.23). The latter contains accounts of Simon Magus and his relationship with Luna and also an account by Stesichorus propounding that Helen of Troy was a phantom created by the goddess Hera, for which the poet was accused of slander by Plato (*Phaedrus* 243a).

both women are not only manifest in convivial drinking sessions, as an allusion to yet another text indicates. After little time with his ‘redemptresses’, Wyatt has a strange dream in which he hears a child crying in his sleep (TR, 807). The passage evokes Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, references to which frequently occur in *The Recognitions*. In Dostoevsky’s novel, Mitya falls asleep and dreams of poor peasants with weeping babies, his dream signifying his ability to feel empathy. In Gaddis the dream similarly indicates a progress from Wyatt’s cool egocentricity to Stephen’s emotional development.

The most crucial lesson he learns from Pastora, however, is the renunciation of salvation as a commodity fetish.⁴⁴⁶ When Stephen frequently has sex with her, Yák accuses him of using the girl as a prostitute. Stephen does contradict the accusation but explains with admiration how she forbade him to play with her breasts: “No, son para la niña, she didn’t want me to... to take what was... wasn’t mine” (TR, 809). Thus, although her gesture is not entirely devoid of notions of profitable exchange, for she does want Stephen’s love in turn (“Me quieres?”: TR, 804) and accepts his money, her withholding of certain ‘goods’ is in fact a refusal of mercantile principles.⁴⁴⁷ As opposed to Esther, who demands everything, and Esme, who gives everything, Pastora gives only what she intends for him, but neither as a service, sacrifice, nor as a gift that obliges the recipient to return anything in exchange. As Stephen explains later, Pastora gave him a daughter, “born out of, not love but borne out of love”, and “when it happened, [...] the present reshaped the past” (TR, 897-98). Stephen accepts that he cannot take what is not his and with that starts to learn how to overcome the mistake of treating the ‘redemptress’ as a commodity fetish and salvation as something to be possessed. The strength of Gaddis’s treatment of this

⁴⁴⁶ Pastora was to be associated with Luna or Sophia in an earlier version of the novel by means of Camilla’s Byzantine earring, suggesting a lineage of different incarnations of the Epinoia or Sophia from Camilla to Marga and Pastora. As Cunningham points out, Stephen intends to set the diamonds from Brown’s ring in Camilla’s earrings to give them Pastora (Cunningham, *Cabala to Entropy*, 153). The (intended) donation alludes to the same situation in *Peer Gynt* (IV, 6), which, in turn, is based on an allusive inversion of Goethe’s *Faust*. Ibsen uses the words “Das Ewig-Weibliche ziehet uns an!” in this context. *Ziehet an* (‘attracts us’) is a deliberate misquotation of Goethe’s *ziehet hinan* (‘draws upward’: F, 12110-11). *The Recognitions* is abundant of similar misquotations, for instance “Zwei Brüste wohnen ach! in meiner Seele” (“Two breasts, alas! are dwelling in my soul”: TR, 392), which is an even cruder inversion of Goethe’s lines (F, 1112) that hardly refers to the life-giving breasts of Mother Nature (F, 455-56). Yet, however ‘debasement’ such references may be, for Wyatt’s relation to Esme as well as to Marga(reta) fairly well reflects Faust’s two perceptions of women as either a doll (F, 2651, 3476) or angel (F, 2659, 3494), Gaddis manages to doubly invert the evaluation of Eros from debased to ennobling. The latter can be best seen by contrasting Wyatt’s relationship with Pastora to that with Esther.

⁴⁴⁷ For an analysis of this notion see Žižek, *On Belief*, 69.

theme is that such ‘redemption’ does not ennoble the criminal, for Stephen remains a forger and murderer (of his fellow student Han, as one learns about on the very last pages of the novel) instead of being washed clean from his sins.⁴⁴⁸ His guilt-ridden denial of life, however, is confronted with a love that is, in Christian terms, ‘merciless’. The Wyatt who has no love to give learns to want the loved one with “*all of his predicates*”.⁴⁴⁹ And to love the other person with “all” their predicates, as Žižek notes, exactly means to “love the Other BECAUSE of his limitation, helplessness, ordinariness”, not for the surplus they promise.⁴⁵⁰ That Wyatt effectively ‘pays’ for Pastora does therefore not merely contribute to the romantically prosaic depiction of virgin mothers and saintly heroin addicts in the novel. It seriously dismisses the ‘investment’ propagated in Simon Magus’ story as well as the romantic debasement of women to soteriological agents in Gaddis’s sources, be it Senta in Wagner’s *Flying Dutchman*, Solveigh in Ibsen, or Gretchen (as the Penitent) in *Faust*. In this respect the ‘vulgar’ episode signifies a break with the commodity system of guilt and salvation, art and money, significance and emptiness, and is lastly also a prolepsis to the ending of the novel. Stephen commits himself to yet another voyage, not for redemption but the encounter with the old man of St. Paul’s Colossians, his temporal, sinful, fallen self.

6. Erasure and Inconclusiveness

[T]he new can appear only through the destruction of the old
—Agamben, *The Man without Content*⁴⁵¹

Wyatt’s end ultimately remains ambiguous, for he simply leaves the texture of the novel some sixty pages before the latter ends, by no means giving testimony whether

⁴⁴⁸ In the last part of the novel Stephen tells the writer Ludy out of the blue, as it were, about his fellow-student Han in Munich in an account hardly understandable without knowledge about the chapter Gaddis and his editor Catherine Carver agreed on to carve out from the published version of the novel. Stephen provides fragments of the omitted subplot on pages 878-879. Han and Wyatt make a trip to the Jungfrau mountain where the former wants to have sexual intercourse against the will of the latter. Years later both meet by chance in Africa, where Wyatt kills his companion in self-defence. Han, as one can infer from Stephen’s fragmented accounts, is not only an aggressive homosexual, he is also of the devil’s party, as Han has “a face tattooed on his fundament” (TR, 879), a devil-face or devil’s kiss. Pynchon provides a striking parallel to the latter in *Gravity’s Rainbow* (GR, 329).

⁴⁴⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, transl. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis/ London. University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 2.

⁴⁵⁰ Žižek, *On Belief*, 147.

⁴⁵¹ Agamben, *The Man without Content*, 105.

he affirms or renounces Gaddis's appropriations of Pauline soteriology and agapistic ethics. In focussing on the apophatic characteristics of the novel, however, one should not underestimate the "transformational possibilities" implied by the breakdown and re-emergence of its protagonist.⁴⁵²

Like Mann, Gaddis criticises the politics and aesthetics of redemption for better or worse, but like Pynchon, he also devises in his 'mock-version' of *Faust* a socio-cultural allegory that, however tentatively, also implies ways beyond the lamented *conditio Americana*, human development outside the *vas hermetica* and outside economic circuits. Despite its nostalgic tenor, *The Recognitions* is not a *laudatio temporis actis*. Neither does Gaddis use his Faust as a negative identification figure to imply a Christian model but draws from the heretical elements embedded in the myth, ironically undercutting the soteriological bargains comprised under the terms *predestination*, *grace*, and *good works*, and pointing towards a *modus vivendi* in which the notion of 'fruitful exchange' is rid of economic connotations. In this respect, Joseph Conway is absolutely right in stating that Gaddis "refuses to give up the folly of searching for transcendence".⁴⁵³ Although the novel remains ambiguous about Wyatt's 'fate', his final turning to love (erotic and agapistic) prevails over both May's notion of universal guilt as an indebtedness to the Lord's grace and Valentine's 'possession' of renounced happiness.⁴⁵⁴ Accordingly, one does not do full justice to Gaddis's debut in assuming that it concludes entirely without recognition. Wyatt has an anagnorisis, but while Clement of Rome accepts the Christian dogma in disfavour of the Gnostic, it is not convincing to state that Wyatt definitively commits himself to either offer.⁴⁵⁵ Whereas in Pseudo-Clement recognition is a "final proof of Divine

⁴⁵² Ingendaay, following LaCapra, points to the transformational possibilities of Wyatt's 'rebirth' (*Die Romane*, 42). In terms of the latter see Gaddis (cited in Koenig *Splinters*, 36): "I say I don't want the end to seem trite, an easy way out; because I don't want it to sound as though Wyatt has finally found his place in company with a simple stupid and comparatively unattractive woman who loves him ... I simply want the intimation that, in starting a drawing of his daughter, Wyatt, seeing her in her trust and faith (love), is *beginning*. He may not yet understand, but the least we can do is start him, after all this, on the right way".

⁴⁵³ Conway, "Failing Criticism", 85.

⁴⁵⁴ Wyatt's final act does not negate religious implications per se but critically comments back on the systems represented by May and Valentine. He abandons faith as a social reproduction of prohibitive law and turns to love as a means of salvation.

⁴⁵⁵ Even if the geographical symbolism is overwhelming, Wyatt's "homecoming" to the rocky landscape of Spain cannot be read as a return to the church (as the "rock" in Matthew 16:18). Similarly, he emerges from the waters, hermetically transformed with a new name and even experiences something comparable to the Gnostic *kairos* but does not transcend as do the *pneumatikoi* but remains within the realm of the given. In respect to the latter I contradict Koenig, who argues for an epiphany ("The Writing of *The Recognitions*", 23).

Providence”,⁴⁵⁶ *The Recognitions* is far less affirmative. Rather than retuning to a family or home, Wyatt simply wanders off, renouncing both soteriological doctrines *expressis verbis*, being *pro* material world, *pro* love and *pro* sin and desire. As he exclaims:

Look back, if once you're started in living, you're born into sin, then? And how do you atone? By locking yourself up in remorse for what you might have done? Or by living it through. By locking yourself up in remorse with what you know you have done? Or going back and living it through. By locking yourself up with your work, until it becomes a gessoed surface, all prepared, clean and smooth as ivory? Or by living it through. By drawing line in your mind? Or by living it through. It was sin from the start, and possible all the time, to know it's possible and avoid it? Or by living it through [...] to have lived it through, and live it through, and deliberately go on living it through. (TR, 896)

Wyatt's new approach gives a crucial twist to Pauline theology. As Žižek notes apropos the latter (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:45-49): “We raise from the Fall not by undoing its effects, but in recognizing the longed-for liberation in the Fall itself”.⁴⁵⁷ As Wyatt contends, “it's only the living through that redeems it” (TR, 898), that sheds off the ‘old man’.⁴⁵⁸ And his decision to “simplify” and “to live deliberately” (TR, 900) is in accord with this.⁴⁵⁹

Eventually, Wyatt's last episodes also provide an equally ambivalent (or rather tongue-in-cheek) perspective on art. After Brown's death and his own transformation into Stephen, Wyatt exchanges the search for God and Christian redemption with the acceptance of his sinfulness and imperfection. With that he also leaves the perfected limitations of his art behind, by turning to the open, both in life and on the canvas.⁴⁶⁰ While he, by then half blind, restores paintings by Titian and Valdés-Leal, he dismisses the Flemish Primitives:

⁴⁵⁶ Koenig, *Splinters*, 59.

⁴⁵⁷ Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, 81, 85.

⁴⁵⁸ The cross reference to Paul is provided in a statement by Otto, who relates his old man, Mr. Pivner, to the old self in Colossians 3:9-10 with the words “put off the old man, says the Bible” (TR, 481). Basil Valentine takes up the association in a reference to the homicide/suicide of Wyatt's ‘multiple personality’: “This so-called homicide of yours, [...] putting off the old man” (TR, 546, 553).

⁴⁵⁹ As Moore notes in his *Gaddis Annotations Project*, Wyatt's intentions to ‘live deliberately’ and treat people ‘as if they were real’ are inspired by Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), which Wyatt reads.

⁴⁶⁰ I use *open* here in Heidegger's sense, as Being experienced in an unsheltered way; see Martin Heidegger, “Why Poets?”, *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 212.

[I]n the Middle Ages when everything was in pieces and gilding the pieces, yes to insure their separation for fear there was no God... before the Renaissance. [...] Everything vain, asserting itself... every vain detail, for fear... (TR, 875)

Wyatt now pleads against the accumulation of cultural, even spiritual capital and poses as decidedly pro simplification (“to front only the essential facts of life”, to use Thoreau’s words). He admires the fearlessness of Titian and el Greco, painters of the Italian and Spanish Renaissance, also of Valdés in the Baroque era, their ability to bear spaces not cluttered with vain detail: “El Greco is all one... one” (TR, 807); these “painters weren’t afraid of spaces” (TR, 875).⁴⁶¹ Should his laudation be reliable, one could conclude that he has finally given up trying to fill the material, depictorial and spiritual void. As a person, he seems to have extinguished his Oedipal urges; in religious terms he has turned from soteriological obsessions, and as a ‘painter’ (if one can use the term for a restorer) he has accepted empty space. The homunculus (cf. chapter 2.3) would then have found his Galatea (Pastora) and embarked on becoming a real being. His turn, however, also bears distinct implications that liberation never occurs without violence and destruction. Wyatt, it seems, does not give up the hope of finding originals behind the layers of pigments, behind the pasteboard reality. His adherence to the Platonic search for older, that is, more valid and venerable strata behind the real, can be traced in all dominant thematic complexes of the novel, be it religion, art, literature, or alchemy, and even his final restoration is not devoid of implications that he still seeks essences, real forms underneath the surface layer of pigments: “It was there all the time, and all Praxiteles did was to remove the excess marble, and here...here is the... the one I just restored, the Valdés Leal...” (TR, 875).⁴⁶² Whereas the Early Flemish painters excessively cover empty spaces with detail and ornament, Praxiteles’s (and Stephen’s) quasi-Platonic gesture of removing excess is directed to the opposite. The motivation for

⁴⁶¹ Comnes (*The Ethics*, 80) points out some relations to Rilke, especially Rilke’s concept of *Platzangst* (the fear of spaces) and his admiration of El Greco. It may be an ironic coincidence that Zeitblom in *Doctor Faustus* describes the catatonic Leverkühn as resembling “a nobleman by El Greco”, commenting this “What a sardonic trick of nature [...] that she is able to create the image of highest spirituality where the spirit has departed!” (DF, 533).

⁴⁶² His ‘restoration’ is related to a story Otto narrates some four hundred pages earlier, a story he heard from “some friend” (Wyatt): “It was a forged Titian that somebody had painted over another old painting, when they scraped the forged Titian away they found some worthless old painting underneath it, the forger had used it because it was an old canvas. But then there was something under that worthless painting, and they scraped it off and underneath that they found a Titian that had been there all the time. [...] I mean he didn’t know [...], but it knew, I mean something knew. I mean, do you see what I mean? That underneath that the original is there, that the real... thing is there” (TR, 450-51).

doing so is that the Flemish painter, in Gaddis's account, is afraid that everything on earth and in life is in vain, that there is infinite emptiness underneath the surface reality, whereas the Platonist hopes that there is an ideal form underneath the surface. However, as John Johnston holds, one of the concluding implications of the novel is that Platonic assumptions are exhausted.⁴⁶³ Petrus van Ewijk argues in similar terms:

Near the end of the novel, Wyatt, or at that point Stephen, is witnessed scraping off paintings, as if he were trying to dig through all the layers in hope of finding something. But he of all people should know that there is only a blank canvas underneath.⁴⁶⁴

In fact, an alcoholic with impaired sight, Wyatt thinks he restores the paintings by removing dirt, excess accumulation on the painting's space. To what extent he does so, however, can be inferred by the immediate response of his dialogue partner: "Hahauuuu!" (TR, 875), and "But you can't [...] take that painting and ... and do what you're doing" (TR, 872). In fact, he scratches the paint off the canvas without even realising it. However, although Johnson's and van Ewijk's arguments constitute a valid reading, I think Gaddis produces, again, a stalemate which one cannot approach with an either/or dichotomy. If Wyatt/Stephen is a failed alchemist, as Comnes argues, in that he reverses the creative act and is unable to produce 'gold', then he is certainly also a failed Platonist.⁴⁶⁵ Nevertheless, both failures are employed in a unifying gesture that suggests a way out of the stalemate. Wyatt's restoration of Titian and El Greco constitutes an unintended yet crucial aesthetic turn. Wyatt destroys art but in doing so also, I think, restores its possibilities. Heidegger's notion of clearance (*Lichtung*) and especially Agamben's call for the destruction of aesthetics come to mind. In *The Man without Content*, Agamben suggests:

Perhaps nothing is more urgent—if we really want to engage the problem of art in our time—than a destruction of aesthetics that would, by clearing away what is usually taken for granted,

⁴⁶³ Johnston, *Carnival*, 20. For a contradictory reading see Ingendaay, *Die Romane*, 52.

⁴⁶⁴ Van Ewijk, "Life must be lead in the dark", 385. Tanner has made a similar point by arguing that a literal reading of *The Recognitions* should not exclude the possibility that Stephen by then is simply mad, "alcoholism, inanition, and a series of extraordinary adventures having taken their toll" (*City of Words*, 398). Yák's concern that Wyatt might have "caught something" from Pastora substantiates such a reading (TR, 809, cf. 815).

⁴⁶⁵ Comnes, *The Ethics*, 79.

allow us to bring into question the very meaning of aesthetics as the science of the work of art.⁴⁶⁶

I would like to argue that Wyatt, in erasing the paintings, undertakes such a clearing. Trying to uncover the ideal form behind appearances, Wyatt undoes completion. “[D]enuding the canvas of Rubens’s nudes”,⁴⁶⁷ he restores artistic as well as personal potentials. However dim, there is still an implication of hope that the fragments will be reassembled, which is why I do not fully agree with van Ewijk’s suggestion that without a framework Wyatt “fades away and turns into nothing”.⁴⁶⁸ Abandoning God’s gaze, turning *sine signo cavum apud deum* into all *is* empty of sense, provides the basis for the human liberty, or duty, to make sense of oneself and to “live deliberately”. He turns from hubristic partial development to holistic growth. While he thereby transcends his ‘iron cage’, he remains within the bounds of the *conditio humana*. And although it is unclear if he “reach[es] at last the human state” (F, 832), Goethe’s message of possible humane development is not contradicted.

⁴⁶⁶ Agamben, *The Man without Content*, 6. De la Durayante elucidates this as follows: “Art’s having ceased to play a shaping role in our culture—it’s loss of an ‘authentic’ or ‘original’ status—has become [...] so accepted [...] that it does not attract special notice. [...] To make this absence felt, Agamben attempts to clear away that which has obscured our vision” (*Giorgio Agamben*, 27).

⁴⁶⁷ Safer, “Ironic Allusiveness”, 94.

⁴⁶⁸ Van Ewijk, “Life must be lead in the dark”, 385.

Part III: Faustian Civilization in Thomas Pynchon's *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow*

There is no longer a mythological presence of evil, the presence of a Mephisto or Frankenstein embodying its principle.

Our evil is faceless and imageless. It is present everywhere in homeopathic doses, in the abstract patterns of technology.

—Jean Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact*⁴⁶⁹

But jeremiads are useless unless we can point to a better way.

—Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death*⁴⁷⁰

Despite their proximity to Faustian themes and sensibilities, soul-sellers lead a spectral existence in Pynchon's texts. As overtly as the literary tradition of the myth is employed in Gaddis's *The Recognitions*, as absent it seems in Pynchon. Whereas the former constructs his Faust tale in concentric circles around an alleged original, providing copious allusions to Pseudo-Clemente, Marlowe, Goethe, and Ibsen, Pynchon, hardly includes any references to such texts. As regards viable textual indicators, the magician-scholar is mentioned only in three of Pynchon's works: the short story "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna" contains an allusion to the title of Goethe's work, the confessions of Fausto Majjstral in *V.* are modelled in some respect after the first part of the drama,⁴⁷¹ and the legendary "German fellow" is named in *Mason and Dixon*.⁴⁷² As a representative of occidental civilization, however, Faust's presence seems to be all pervasive, reaching from resonances in *Vineland* (1990) and *Against the Day* (2006) to the plethora of themes and memes in *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow*.⁴⁷³ Unfortunately, the richness and complexity with which Pynchon uses the

⁴⁶⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact*, trans. Chris Turner (Oxford/ New York: Berg, 2002), 173.

⁴⁷⁰ Brown, *Love's Body*, 307.

⁴⁷¹ Peter Serracino-Ingloft, "The Faustus of Malta: Fact and Fiction in Pynchon's *V.*", in *Pynchon, Malta and Wittgenstein*, ed. Petra Bianchi, Arnold Cassola and Peter Serracino-Ingloft (Malta University Publications, Msida, Malta, 1995), 39-54.

⁴⁷² Mason gives an account of how he allegedly spent the eleven days that were skipped in 1752 when Britain adopted the Gregorian calendar. Making use of this surplus time he reads through the restricted sections of the Bodleian library: "all the Knowledge of Worlds [...] lay open to my Questions", which reminds Dixon of "Faust". Thomas Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon* (London: Vintage, 1998), 558.

⁴⁷³ For reasons of space I will not provide more extensive examinations of Faustian connections in *Against the Day*, *Mason & Dixon*, and *Vineland* but take *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow* as paradigmatic (and the most fruitful) examples of Pynchon's use of the myth. Cowart briefly discusses the character Frenesi in *Vineland* as Faustian but concludes that both "the myth and mythical identities prove unstable" in the novel (*Thomas Pynchon and the Dark Passages of History*, 117). He also occasionally employs the term *Faustian* in order to characterise Western civilization as presented in *Mason & Dixon* and *Against the Day*, however, without going into detail (*ibid.*, 15, 18). Alexander Theroux identified in the title a reference to 2 Peter 3:7, in which the heavens and the earth are reserved unto fire "against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men". Alexander Theroux, "Fantastic Journey", *Wall Street Journal* (24 November 2007), W8. There are also resonances of *Faust* in the title (thanks to Terry Reilly for pointing out this connection). Nikola Tesla, who is featured in the novel, writes in his

myth has not been given sufficient critical attention. While the Faustian connections in Pynchon have been pointed out from the very infancy of Pynchon scholarship, albeit without leading to differentiated examinations,⁴⁷⁴ Faust scholars have only very reluctantly acknowledged his contribution to the literary tradition of the myth.⁴⁷⁵ One reason for this is certainly that Pynchon's use of myth, as Peter Schaub has argued, is never systematic, "for it is both a parody of literary modernism and a serious invocation of mythic analogues within a 'disenchanted' civilization".⁴⁷⁶ Moreover, as the relations of his work to Marlowe, Goethe, Dostoevsky, and Mann are very implicit and often characterised by inverted or ironic allusiveness, to employ Elaine Safer's term, such reluctance is unsurprising.⁴⁷⁷ *V.*, for instance, has only more recently been read as a Spenglerian vision of history, and relations to the myth in the confessions of Fausto Majstral have only been cursorily examined by Serracino-Inglott.⁴⁷⁸ Pynchon's third novel proves an even more complicated case. The two attempts to present *Gravity's Rainbow* as "a Goethe in greasepaint", to use Joseph Slade's phrase,⁴⁷⁹ Kathryn Hume's monograph and a section in William Grim's work on Faust in literature and music, have elucidated many parallels and thematic relations between Pynchon's novel and *Faust*: in terms of characters, there are correspondences between Slothrop as the seeking Faust (part one) and Weissmann as Faust the emperor and builder (part two), whereas Mephistophelian chaos and stasis relates to the principles of entropy and disorder. The cold scientific rationality of Faust's

not little boisterous autobiography that he was reciting some lines from Faust's Easter Walk when suddenly overcome by a vision of some of his later inventions. Nikola Tesla, *My Inventions* (Zagreb: Skolska Knjiga Publishing Enterprise, 1977), 44.

⁴⁷⁴ Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* in relation to Goethe's *Faust* is treated most extensively in Grim (*The Faust Legend in Music and Literature*, vol. 2) and Kathryn Hume, *Pynchon's Mythography: An Approach to 'Gravity's Rainbow'* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 145-153. Cowart points out that Pynchon treats German culture and especially the nation's Faustian aspects as a paradigm of Western culture, yet without providing details (*Thomas Pynchon and the Dark Passages of History*, 15, 18, 58-60). Further Faustian connections are mentioned in Cowart (*The Art of Allusion*, 129); Moore (*The Style of Connectedness*, 202); Slade (*Thomas Pynchon*, 239). Spenglerian aspects in *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow* are discussed in Dalsgaard, "The Linking Feature", 97-116; Deborah Madsen, *The Postmodernist Allegories of Thomas Pynchon* (Leicester/ London: Leicester University Press, 1991), 85; Larissa S. Schieweg, *Die Bürde der Geschichte: Der Untergang des Baedekerlandes im Werk von Thomas Pynchon* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2006). Lawrence C. Wolfley examines Brown's notion of Faustian man in the context of *Gravity's Rainbow* in "Repression's Rainbow: The Presence of Norman O. Brown in Pynchon's Big Novel", *PMLA* 92, no. 5 (1977): 873-89.

⁴⁷⁵ Whereas Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960) could not contain the 'new mutant', Ziolkowski, Durrani, and Hawkes omit Pynchon for other reasons.

⁴⁷⁶ Thomas H. Schaub, *Pynchon: the Voice of Ambiguity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 71; see also Cowart, *Thomas Pynchon and the Dark Passages of History*, 24.

⁴⁷⁷ Safer, *The Contemporary American Comic Epic*, 21.

⁴⁷⁸ Cowart has provided the hitherto most consistent (yet also brief) reading of *V.* in relation to the Spenglerian narrative of decline (*Thomas Pynchon and the Dark Passages of History*, 43-50, 163).

⁴⁷⁹ Slade, *Thomas Pynchon*, 239.

assistant Wagner is copiously represented in Pynchon's cast, most explicitly in the Pavlovian psychologist Pointsman. Greta Erdmann, the plaything of the German film industry, monopolises the character of Gretchen, and although Katje is richly associated with succubae and the 'simulacrum' Helena, her transition from a collaborator to a member of the Counterforce is not unlike Gretchen's penitence. In terms of scenic relations, Slothrop's contact with Säure Bummer's dope and his transformation into Rocketman relate to Faust's rejuvenation in the Witch Kitchen scene.⁴⁸⁰ The novel features a Nordic and a classical Walpurgisnacht, one on the Brocken, and one in form of a party on the ship Anubis, which is directly referred to as "very Walpurgisnacht" (GR, 463). While Blicero's construction of the Rocket 00000 corresponds closely with the megalomaniac construction project in the second part of Goethe's play, its Easter (or rather April Fool's Day) launch stands in direct contrast to Faust's resurrecting Easter walk, and the rocket's final descent ironically comments back on Faust's final redemption.⁴⁸¹ Although such connections can be furthered, from Byron the Bulb as Euphorion to the Zone-Hereros as the Volcano Pygmies of the Classical Walpurgis Night (F, 7606-21), Hume, whose mythographical observations have not been spared criticism, rightly points out that such relations are never systematic but often merely invoke "Faust as Western cultural hero" in order to comment upon specific characters and actions at hand.⁴⁸² Eventually, even though the "spirit of Faust hovers over" *Gravity's Rainbow*,⁴⁸³ tangible intertextual relations between the novel and the myth are less straightforward than Hume and Grim present them.⁴⁸⁴ Firstly, the nuances of the term Faustian as

⁴⁸⁰ Säure shares with Mephistopheles the magic of performative speech, the "act of naming" (GR, 366), and the production of false money.

⁴⁸¹ Grim argues that "The Easter launch of Rocket 00000 [...] is in direct contrast to Faust's reawakened interest in life by the Easter chorus that occurs at the beginning of" Goethe's drama (*The Faust Legend*, 2.80).

⁴⁸² Hume, *Pynchon's Mythography*, 176. Slade, in a review of Hume and Moore, argues that Hume's "attempts to explore Faustian elements falter", calling for a fuller exploration of Weissmann's Faustian project and an embedding of her mythological criticism in a Weberian framework. Joseph W. Slade, Review, "Pynchon's Mythography: An Approach to 'Gravity's Rainbow', and: *The Style of Connectedness: 'Gravity's Rainbow' and Thomas Pynchon*", *Modern Fiction Studies* 34, no. 4 (1988): 665. Since the publication of Hume's work, relations between Slothrop and Faust have been further elucidated by Grim, while Weissmann is partly analysed as a Faustian character by Thomas Moore.

⁴⁸³ Hume, *Pynchon's Mythography*, 143.

⁴⁸⁴ Goethe, for instance, surfaces in some of Slothrop's episodes, most explicitly in the latter's escapade with Geli Tripping on the Brocken. The Brockengespenst, however, is described in Goethe's *Theory of Colours*, not in *Faust*. Moreover, while references to the "Mothers" are more likely to be inspired by Freud, or even Rilke's Tenth Duino Elegy, than *Faust*, the "Walpurgisnacht" orgy on the Anubis may well have been inspired by the chapter of the same title in Mann's *Magic Mountain*. The well-known twenty-fifth chapter of the latter's *Doctor Faustus* reverberates in Säure Bummer's and

discussed in the first part of my thesis, are not always reflected in their works (Grim differentiates between the Goethean and Spenglerian variety but Hume does not). Secondly, most critics' focus on Pynchon's relations to Goethe or occasional generic reference to 'Faustian man' in their discussions of his texts, does by no means justice to the complexity with which he negotiates the subject. In fact, it is hardly acknowledged that as regards Faust-related literary influences, the work of Mann is at least as crucial as that of Goethe, if not more. In his 1974 monograph Joseph Slade had already pointed out that when *Gravity's Rainbow*

appeared, most critics dwelled on Pynchon's similarity to Joyce. However, we should note that a more logical affinity would be with Thomas Mann", who "has many times been called a literary equivalent of Max Weber."⁴⁸⁵

Surprisingly, however, and this has not yet been treated in Pynchon scholarship it is not Mann's *Doctor Faustus* but *The Magic Mountain* that is most dominantly present in both *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow*. It is so not as a 'silent partner' like in the case of *Doctor Faustus* and *The Recognitions*, but in distinct and traceable relations. Some themes of Mann's novel briefly feature in *V.*, especially in the Mondaugen chapter, in which the naïve engineer and voyeur Mondaugen, residing in an enclave of decadence amongst death, is seduced by a most dangerous power. The parallels between *The Magic Mountain* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, on the other hand, are so pervasive and conclusive that it is surprising that they are hardly acknowledged at all in Pynchon scholarship, especially those works concerned with affinities between the two authors (for instance Serracino-Inglott or Thomas Moore). In order to close this gap, a comparative analysis of both authors' 'pedagogical' dispute about the 'soul' of the West will therefore be one major focal area of my later analyses. To mention the most

Gustav Schlabone's discussion about dodecaphony, but so does Adorno's *Philosophy of New Music*. Slothrop's rainbow vision toward the end of the novel (GR, 626) is indeed the most complex example of this sort. On a first glance the scene seems to be taken from the respective experience in the second part of Goethe's *Faust*. A theme of redemption, however, it may as well allude to Hans Castorp's vision of a rainbow in the "Snow" chapter of *The Magic Mountain*, as a direct comparison of the two texts reveals. Again, this intertextual relation can easily be supplemented with another of Pynchon's sources. "Meaning is the play, or interplay, of light. As in schizophrenia, all things lose their boundaries, become iridescent with many-colored significances. No things, but an iridescence, a rainbow-effect. *Am farbigen Abglanz haben wir das Leben*. An indirect reflection; or refraction; broken light, or enigma", Brown writes in *Love's Body* (New York: Vintage, 1966), 246 (hereafter cited in text as LB).

⁴⁸⁵ Slade, *Thomas Pynchon*, 185.

conspicuous already briefly: not only do both authors, as Slade argues, invest their work

with mythological associations on a vast scale, in a manner both deliberate and mocking, utilizing both central myths of Western civilization and popular culture myths. Orphic myths [...] jostle against Faustian legend.⁴⁸⁶

Like Pynchon's, Mann's *Zeitroman* contains copious allusions to the first part of Goethe's drama, the Venus mountain of *Tannhäuser*, *Parzival*, *Tristan and Isolde*, Grimm's Fairy Tales, and the Nekya (or katabasis). And like Mann, Pynchon features séances, comic allusions to Freud, Krafft-Ebing, erotic aspects of technology, the romantic-transgressive mood with which a generation was led to war, and plenitude of plot-relevant songs. Besides providing one keystone in terms of Slothrop's mythopoeic journey between Faust and Grail quester, as well as his peculiar libidinal sensibilities, the *Magic Mountain* thereby also establishes also an angle on crucial themes of Pynchon's alchemical *Bildungsroman*: time, decadence, determinism, war, and the diminishing possibilities of humane life amidst death.⁴⁸⁷

Rather than dismissing Pynchon's peculiar mixture of too much and nothing as a mere contiguity to Faust, I therefore argue that Pynchon draws considerably from the legacy of the myth in charting the "toll of the West's appetite for knowledge and

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁴⁸⁷ In an essay, Mann elucidates the interrelation of quest motifs in his novel. Since these are crucial in Pynchon's and Gaddis's quests as well, it is worthwhile quoting the section in full length. "I read a manuscript by a young scholar [...], and it considerably refreshed my memory and my consciousness of myself. The author places *The Magic Mountain* and its simple hero in the line of a great tradition that is not only German but universal. He classifies it as an art that he calls 'The Quester Legend,' which reaches very far back in tradition and folklore. *Faust* is of course the most famous German representative of the form, but behind Faust, the eternal seeker, is a group of compositions generally known as the Sangraal or Holy Grail romances. Their hero [...] is the seeker, the quester, who ranges heaven and hell, makes terms with them, and strikes a pact with the unknown, with sickness and evil, with death and the other world, with the supernatural, the world that in *The Magic Mountain* is called 'questionable.' He is forever searching for the Grail—that is to say, the Highest: knowledge, wisdom, consecration, the philosophers' stone, the aurum potabile, the elixir of life. The writer declares that Hans Castorp is one of these seekers. Perhaps he is right. The Quester of the Grail legend, at the beginning of his wanderings, is often called a fool, a great fool, a guileless fool. That corresponds to the naïveté and simplicity of my hero. [...] Hans Castorp is a searcher after the Holy Grail. You would never have thought it when you read his story—if I did myself, it was both more and less than thinking. Perhaps you will read the book again from this point of view. And perhaps you will find out what the Grail is: the knowledge and the wisdom, the consecration, the highest reward, for which not only the foolish hero but the book itself is seeking. You will find it in the chapter called 'Snow,' where Hans Castorp, lost on the perilous heights, dreams his dream of humanity. If he does not find the Grail, yet he divines it, in his deathly dream, before he is snatched [...] into the European catastrophe". Thomas Mann, "The Making of the *Magic Mountain*", *Atlantic Monthly* 191, no. 1 (1953): 45.

power”,⁴⁸⁸ albeit in a highly indirect manner that resists dogmatism and non-negotiable mythemes. If the *Urphänomen* of life lies in form-preserving instability and multiplicity, an assertion found in Goethe, Mann, and Pynchon, then the latter effectively draws from this principle as a form of epistemological resistance to technological and totalitarian rationality. As Joseph Tabbi points out,

[t]hrough the excessive proliferation of multiple textual realities, Pynchon would avoid imprisoning himself within his own structuring metaphors, in a sense deconstructing his on text in advance. But if in doing so he also resists suggesting a narrative source in some determinate ur-meaning [...], he is careful at least to locate each trajectory in its particular historical circumstance. [...] As readers we might benefit from a similar resistance to interpretative strategies that either totalize or reduce it to fragments.⁴⁸⁹

However, if Pynchon challenges eschatological and deterministic models in such a manner, he does so, like Gaddis, without slipping into relativism or pure enigma, for although the quests of characters like Weissmann and Slothrop may appear like abstract hermetical tales (cf. F, 12104-11; MM, 715), they can and do in fact “converge on a vanished historical reality” that is firmly inscribed into the texture of *Gravity’s Rainbow*.⁴⁹⁰

The latter, then, accounts for some crucial deviations from the plot and ideology conveyed in traditional Faustiana. Firstly, Pynchon’s elective, yet critical affinity with Weber, Brown, and Marcuse indicates a refusal to represent Western civilization as a satanic project from which one could only escape by conforming to specific religious doctrines. Even if the many characters in Pynchon’s third novel, if not the novel itself, as Quilligan holds, search “for a means of salvation”, Pynchon indicates that he refrains from Christian soteriology.⁴⁹¹ As John Krafft, Molly Hite, and Inger

⁴⁸⁸ David Cowart, “Pynchon and the Sixties”, *Critique* 41 (1999), 11.

⁴⁸⁹ Joseph Tabbi, *Postmodern Sublime: Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 93.

⁴⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹¹ Maureen Quilligan, “Twentieth-Century American Allegory”, in *Thomas Pynchon*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2003), 93. Hume sees a crucial turn in Pynchon’s *Against the Day* in terms of his representation of religion, especially the concept of penance (“The Religious and Political Vision of Pynchon’s *Against the Day*”, 163-187). Irrespective of whether his late work really valorises the latter, or what Hume describes as ‘Catholic anarchism’, in positive terms, he remains highly critical of any religious agenda in his early work. Holy Communion, for instance, is linked in *V.* by its magical capability to unite a large number of heterogeneous “lonely souls” (*V.*, 471, cf. 384) not only with mob violence (“Violent overthrow is a Christian phenomenon”: *V.*, 472) but also with the “Baedeker world” (*V.*, 70) created by north European tourists in “their own image” (*V.*, 88), a molar “parallel society” (*V.*, 411) of this “perfectly arranged tourist-state” (*V.*, 71) derived from the work of

Dalsgaard have observed, God's disappearance from Pynchon's novelistic universe and *Gravity's Rainbow* in particular has left only systems traps and "Baby Jesus Con Game[s]" (GR, 318), and all attempts to transcend the modern wasteland not merely increase the latter's growth but are invariably identified as either romantic delusions or manifestations of totalitarian ideology. Moreover, Pynchon's anti-Puritan bias, like Gaddis's, by no means excludes the share of the Protestant work ethic in shaping the modern West but presents its spirit as one of the cornerstones of the latter's Faustianism. The most superficial perusal of *V.* or *Gravity's Rainbow* will detect that behind his sadistic Nazi technocrats, Pynchon shifts his focus to "that succession of the criminally insane who have enjoyed power since 1945, including the power to do something",⁴⁹² to the nightmarish realisation of the American Dream that was soon to be perceived as harbouring, as Berman puts it, the "world's most virulent engines of destruction".⁴⁹³ His depiction of the destructive megalomania of human self-apotheosis as intrinsic to the American quest for supremacy thereby connects him to contemporaries from the New Left and to authors such as Schapiro or Mailer. The latter, in *Of a Fire on the Moon* (1970), for instance, would not be content with seeing Faustus put on trial after the Second World War but point to the complicity of the damnable scholar and the elite of the land of the elect. Discussing the appeal of the inventor and SS member Wernher von Braun, who is best known for his work on the ballistic missile A4, "the ur-model for U.S. and Soviet spaceflight and warfare rocket programs",⁴⁹⁴ Mailer muses:

Who would begin to measure the secret appeal of the Nazis by now? [...] America was this day mighty but headless. America was torn by the specter of civil war, and many a patriot and many a big industrialist [...] saw the cities and the universities as a collective pit for black heathen, Jewish revolutionaries, a minority polyglot hirsute scum of nihilists, hippies, sex

the first guidebook writer, which, in turn stands close to Foppl's hermetically sealed community in the German southwest African protectorate (cf. Smith, *Pynchon and History*, 26). Thus, while *The Recognitions*, although equally averse to tourism, treats the opposition of "northern/Protestant/intellectual against Mediterranean/Roman Catholic/irrational" (*V.*, 190) to a great extent in favour of the latter, Pynchon less than subtly correlates both mass movements with the Fascist imperialist model that subjugates its members to an enforced conformity and excludes everything outside the community: "Tourism [...] is supranational, like the Catholic Church, and perhaps the most absolute communion we know on earth [...]; their Bible is clearly written and does not admit of private interpretation" (*V.*, 409).

⁴⁹² Pynchon, "Introduction", *Slow Learner*, 18.

⁴⁹³ Berman, *All that Is Solid*, 80.

⁴⁹⁴ Bruno Arich-Gerz, "The Comet and the Rocket: Intertextual Constellations about Technological Progress in Bruno Schulz's 'Kometa' and Thomas Pynchon's 'Gravity's Rainbow'", *Comparative Literature Studies* 41, no.2 (2004): 235; see also Moore, *The Style of Connectedness*, 232.

maniacs, drug addicts, liberal apologists and freaks. Crime pushed the American public to give birth to dreams of order. Fantasies of order had to give way to lusts for new order. Order was restraint, but new order would call for [...] an exceptional effort, a unifying dream.⁴⁹⁵

Gaddis, although in a different context, summarises this tendency neatly: “I’m talking about fascism, that’s where this compulsion for order ends up”.⁴⁹⁶ Fully in accord with such assertions, Pynchon provides in the “proto-Fascist” discourse of some of his early characters an adequate representation of that style of politics described in Richard Hofstadter’s seminal essay.⁴⁹⁷ Like Mailer and others he also identifies the insidious interlocking of such politics and the rise of an unprecedented military-industrial complex. When Pynchon, as an essayist, returns to the subject in “Is It OK to Be a Luddite?”, he comments:

By 1945, the factory system—which, more than any piece of machinery, was the real and major result of the Industrial Revolution—had been extended to include the Manhattan Project, the German long-range rocket program and the death camps, such as Auschwitz. It has taken no major gift of prophecy to see how these three curves of development might plausibly converge, and before too long. Since Hiroshima, we have watched nuclear weapons multiply out of control, and delivery systems acquire, for global purposes, unlimited range and accuracy. An unblinking acceptance of a holocaust running to seven- and eight-figure body counts has become—among those who, particularly since 1980, have been guiding our military policies—conventional wisdom.⁴⁹⁸

The “romance of the West with technology” owes “much to the German example” here, as Cowart notes.⁴⁹⁹ Yet in such a vision the Holocaust does not appear as the

⁴⁹⁵ Norman Mailer, *A Fire on the Moon* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1970), 56. For Pynchon’s comparison between Nazism and American totalitarianism see David Witzling, *Everybody’s America: Thomas Pynchon, Race, and the Cultures of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 168.

⁴⁹⁶ Gaddis, *A Frolic of His Own*, 13.

⁴⁹⁷ Pynchon, “Introduction”, *Slow Learner*, 11. The ramblings of Dugan in Pynchon’s short story “The Small Rain” are indeed a “Paranoid Style in American Politics” *avant la lettre*: “He held it as self-evident truths, for example, that the NAACP was a Communist cabal dedicated to 100% intermarriage of the White and Negro races, and that the Virginia gentleman was in reality the *Übermensch*, come at last, prevented from fulfilling his destiny only by the malevolent plotting of the New York Jews” (*Slow Learner*, 29). One needs to note that paranoia does not equal paranoia in Pynchon but ranges from the Freudian variety to secularised Puritan sensibilities; see Scott Sanders, “Pynchon’s Paranoid History”, *Twentieth Century Literature* 21, no. 2 (1975): 178. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, on the other hand, Pynchon goes so far as to suggest that the one-dimensionality of instrumental reason has created a flatness the dehumanising effects of which one can only be adverted by assuming, like the novel’s protagonist Oedipa Maas, a “full circle into some paranoia” (*The Crying of Lot 49*, 126).

⁴⁹⁸ Thomas Pynchon, “Is it O.K. to Be a Luddite?”, *The New York Times Book Review* (28 October 1984): 1, 40-41. Reprinted in: <http://www.pynchon.pomona.edu/uncollected/luddite.html>.

⁴⁹⁹ Cowart, *Thomas Pynchon and the Dark Passages of History*, 58.

culmination of mankind's inhumanity but as the opposite. As the synthetic human SHROUD asks Benny Profane in *V.*:

Remember the photographs of Auschwitz? Thousands of Jewish corpses, stacked up like those poor car-bodies. Schlemihl: It's already started.

"Hitler did that. He was crazy."

Hitler, Eichmann, Mengele. Fifteen years ago. Has it occurred to you there may be no more standards for crazy or sane, now that it's started? (*V.*, 295)

Secondly, other than most other Faustiana, *V.*, and *Gravity's Rainbow* rather daringly suggest that the pervasiveness of the Faustian condition is to a certain degree owed to a dialectic of domination and fatalism. As Shawn Smith and others have indicated,⁵⁰⁰ those characters who accept the power-game by having themselves gathered into the Faustian machineries in *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, are not merely the latter's raw material but often consciously complicit with them. As Pynchon's Sado-anarchist Miklas Thanatz points out, the structure "needs our submission so that it may remain in power. It needs our lusts after dominance so that it can co-opt us into its power game" (GR, 737). If Pynchon addresses here the Weberian hypothesis about the iron cage, into which we are born always already alienated, the Marcusean civilization of repression, in which surrender to those in power is instilled from the beginning, or even the Faustian course to doom, he does not fail to point out that such structures are based on a volitional wager: "The Man has a branch office in each of our brains [...] We do know what's going on, and we let it go on" (GR, 712).

⁵⁰⁰ Shawn Smith, *Pynchon and History: Metahistorical Rhetoric and Postmodern Narrative form in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 85-86.

Chapter 5: Pynchon's *Faust*, Part One

FABIUS. What are these numbers supposed to mean?

PRUDENTIUS. Oh they mean all sorts of things - the downfall of the Pope, the Refomation of the Church, the freeing of all goods, the scornful laughter of Moloch.

—Johann Valentin Andreae, *Turbo, sive, Moleste et frustra per cuncta divagans ingenium* (Helicone: iuxta Parnassum, 1621)

As indicated, Pynchon's *V.* is not only close to *The Recognitions* in that it satirises the decadent narcissism and “phony, Greenwich Village way[s]” (*V.*, 35) of mid-twentieth-century American art communities.⁵⁰¹ This satire is substantiated in both cases by a wider-reaching critique of a mechanised and commoditised culture and a concurrent sense of social entropy, alienation and epistemological fragmentation. In his debut novel Pynchon expounds to such an extent on “the collapse of everything, of meaning, of language, of values”, the threat of “disorder and dislocation wherever you look, entropy drowning everything” (*AA*, 3), to use Gaddis's words, that critic Deborah Madsen speaks of a “V.-metaphysic”, a general breakdown of social and ethical values.⁵⁰² While a character in Pynchon's short story “The Secret Integration” can still maintain that the “only thing a machine *can't* do is play jokes. That's all they'll use people for is jokes”, such hope in a weak remainder of human potential seems practically eradicated in his debut novel.⁵⁰³ There is no doubt that Pynchon, as Judith Chambers notes, continually alludes to a social ethic of care or ‘love’.⁵⁰⁴ Yet he makes also clear that they prefer to renounce such ethic and rather see their humanity “lost on inanimate objects and abstract theories” (*V.*, 405). With these two moments of loss, the augmentation of human power by means of technologies gone wrong (presented on the novel's synchronic axis) and an epistemological impasse (negotiated on its diachronic axis), Pynchon traces the “entropic energies of a civilization on its last legs”, as Cowart holds.⁵⁰⁵ But he thereby also addresses a situation that is more than contiguous to the Faust myth.⁵⁰⁶ Of course, the novel's Weberian portrait of an American post-war generation born into an iron cage of

⁵⁰¹ See Moore, *William Gaddis*, 140. Whether Pynchon had read Gaddis before *V.* was published has not been ascertained.

⁵⁰² Madsen, *The Postmodernist Allegories*, 32.

⁵⁰³ Pynchon, *Slow Learner*, 150.

⁵⁰⁴ Chambers, *Thomas Pynchon*, 127.

⁵⁰⁵ Cowart, *Thomas Pynchon and the Dark Passages of History*, 48.

⁵⁰⁶ John Stark, for instance, holds that Faust figures play a more important role in *V.* than in *Gravity's Rainbow*. John Stark, *Pynchon's Fictions: Thomas Pynchon and the Literature of Information* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1980), 147-48.

“mechanized petrification” and pure utilitarianism, in which material goods and technologies have gained such dominance over humans that any potentially humane development is always already undercut, renders the question of soul-selling partly obsolete.⁵⁰⁷ Nevertheless, the response of Pynchon’s characters to the unavailability of life as an integrated whole is invariably Faustian. When Victoria Price argues that man is too powerless in this world to take God’s place and thus merely plays with the thought, like Benny Profane, who muses “suppose I was God” (V., 31), she fails to acknowledge the sheer violence of such mind-games, as I will demonstrate in the case of Herbert Stencil.⁵⁰⁸ And as regards those who refrain from rebellion against their powerlessness, Pynchon leaves no doubt that only very few engage in the “slow, frustrating and hard work” (V., 365) against this condition while the majority embraces yet further dehumanisation.

1. Dehumanisation

“Technology and comfort—having these, people speak of culture”
—Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus*⁵⁰⁹

On its synchronic axis, as Kathleen Fitzpatrick argues, the novel explores a threatened “inversion of the traditional cultural dominance of human over machine”.⁵¹⁰ Not only is the link between machine and human literalised; even the ability to think outside this link has become impossible. Pynchon thereby not only describes processes of automation and mechanisation that intrude on the sphere of the organic but exposes a tendency toward self-chosen dehumanisation, a literal transformation of self into object, as in the case of Fergus Mixolydian, whose “sleep-switch” (V., 56), a remote control in his arm that connects him with his TV set that ironically twists Marshall McLuhan’s notion of media as the extensions of man. Behind the trope of reverted

⁵⁰⁷ Weber, *The Protestant Work Ethic*, 124, cf. 125. Hanjo Berressem attentively points to Weberian connections in V. Hanjo Berressem, *Pynchon’s Poetics: Interfacing Theory and Text* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 73. It is difficult to consider Pynchon’s cast as more than subjects of power or assemblies of discontinuous parts bound together by a given name. Given this and the reification of power relations, it is problematic to speak of a volitional wager; see Margaret Lynd, “Science, Narrative, and Agency in *Gravity’s Rainbow*”, *Critique* 46, no. 1 (2004): 63.

⁵⁰⁸ Victoria H. Price, *Christian Allusions in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 40-41.

⁵⁰⁹ Mann, *Doctor Faustus*, 66.

⁵¹⁰ Kathleen Fitzpatrick, “The Clockwork Eye: Technology, Woman, and the Decay of the Modern in Thomas Pynchon’s *V.*”, in *Thomas Pynchon: Reading from the Margins*, ed. Niran Abbas (Madison, Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003), 91.

mastery, the “dominance of technology and the willing subjugation of the human to it”,⁵¹¹ lies the suggestion that despite their anxiety about being gathered into a technological order most of V.’s cast attribute the ability to heal their ontological and epistemological alienation to the very forces engendering the latter.

Such a dialectic of unreason comes most explicitly to the fore in the case of the aesthetic surgeon Shale Schoenmaker, who receives his vocational impetus to enter the “medical freemasonry” from the First World War (V., 97, 101), when the face of the liaison officer Evan Godolphin is disfigured and insufficiently restored. Shocked, Schoenmaker dedicates himself to repair the havoc caused by those “who undid the work of nature with automobiles, milling machines, other instruments of civilian disfigurement” (V., 101). Despite his pose, however, there is nothing humane about his impulse, as Shawn Smith argues, for he casually accepts “cruelty and the ideological systems that foster violence”.⁵¹² Convincing himself that he cannot do anything against “things-as-they-are”, the surgeon professes a “conservative laziness” (*ibid.*) and a technological rationality epitomised in a ‘nose job’ he does for Esther Harvitz, an associate of the Whole Sick Crew. Esther self-loathingly wants her “figure-6 nose” changed into what “all wanted”, an “Irish” retroussé nose (V., 103). Although tremendously painful, the operation itself, described in sexual (V., 105) and imperialist (V., 103) terms, is experienced by Esther as a relief. When Schoenmaker saws off the hump on her nose, she feels herself “drifting down, this delicious loss of Estherhood, becoming more and more a blob, with no worries, traumas, nothing: Only Being” (V., 106). Esther, to paraphrase Benjamin, appears so self-alienated that she finds pleasure in her own ‘annihilation’.⁵¹³ Pynchon expounds this trait in having Esther fall in love with Schoenmaker, who subsequently assimilates her physis to the ‘idea’ of her ideal self. A modern day Pygmalion, he justifies his narcissistic project with pseudo-Platonic notions:

It was her soul he loved. [...] Well, what is the soul. It is the idea of the body, the abstraction behind the reality: What Esther really was, shown to the senses with certain imperfections there in the bone and tissue. Schoenmaker could bring out the true, perfect Esther which dwelled inside the imperfect one. Her soul would be there on the outside, radiant, unutterably beautiful. (V., 296-97)

⁵¹¹ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁵¹² Smith, *Pynchon and History*, 53.

⁵¹³ Benjamin, *The Work of Art*, 42.

Schoenmaker proceeds to engineer those parts of Esther that do not harmonise with this ideal. Rather than bringing her inner being into appearance in a genuine process of poiesis, however, his re-territorialisation of her ‘soul’ to the surface is a dehumanising enclosure of Esther’s ‘Being’ into the boundaries set by the parameters of a “cultural harmony”, derived from “movies, advertisements, magazine illustrations” and not least racial stereotypes (V., 103), that eventually leaves her soul entirely disfigured. In his Platonism, Schoenmaker, like Wyatt Gwyon, advocates what Brown terms a reality-negating “Apollonian form”:

Apollo is the god of form—of plastic form in art, of rational form in thought, of civilized form in life. But the Apollonian form is form as the negation of instinct. [...] Hence Apollonian form is form negating matter, immortal form; that is to say, by the irony that overtakes all flight from death, deathly form. Thus Plato [...] is a son of Apollo. (LD, 174)

The rationale of both ‘artists’ turns out to be a failure. But whereas Wyatt’s toying with Platonic forms in *The Recognitions* remains a private exercise in quasi-totalitarian anamnesis contra popular culture that is eventually discredited by its own commoditisation, Schoenmaker’s love of his own skills, which extends into the sphere of the human physis,⁵¹⁴ thrives on pervasive technical and aesthetic ideals, the character of which can be inferred from the surgeon’s conceptualisation of the culturally valued “Irish” nose as a “Jew nose in reverse” (V., 103). Thus, the notion of the ‘beautiful soul’ appears as bitter as calling Mixolydian a “universal man” (V., 56).

In V., even those most opposed to technology and the inanimate seem unable to escape such a rationale. Benny Profane, for instance, a “[Great] Depression Kid” (V., 358), drifter, and member of the Whole Sick Crew, is entirely in discord with the world. A schlemihl who cannot “live in peace” with inanimate things (V., 37), he constantly fears falling prey to accidents, being dominated by objects. Believing that “a schlemihl was hardly a man: somebody who lies back and takes it from objects, like any passive woman” (V., 288), Benny occasionally vents his discontent about his ‘feminisation’ (i.e. disempowerment) by attempting to urinate “on the sun to put it out for good”: “Inanimate objects could do what they wanted. Not what they wanted because things do not want; only men. But things do what they do, and this is why

⁵¹⁴ See Marcuse: “Like technology, art creates another universe of thought and practice against and within the existing one. But in contrast to the technical universe, the artistic universe is one of illusion, semblance, *Schein*” (ODM, 243).

Profane was pissing at the sun” (V., 26). Without a steady job and unable to commit himself to a permanent partner, Benny leads a nomadic, pedestrian lifestyle, spending his days yo-yoing on the underground and cultivating an object-like passivity. Early in the novel, he has a nightmare about his own dissolution in the form of a story of a boy who has a golden screw where his navel should be. After years of unsuccessful endeavours to remove the screw, he eventually manages to do so with the aid of a voodoo doctor, and as he “looks down toward his navel, the screw is gone. That twenty years’ curse is lifted at last. Delirious with joy, he leaps up out of bed, and his ass falls off (V., 40)”⁵¹⁵.

Benny’s dream expresses the dilemma that the human union with or dependency on technology is felt to be oppressive, yet an existence or even a conceptualisation of self without the latter has become impossible: “maybe he was looking for something too to make the fact of his own disassembly plausible as that of any machine” (*ibid.*)⁵¹⁶. However, Benny’s dream also contains a distinct wish to be objectified. This phantasmal transformation of self into machine, in some sense a foreshadowing of Slothrop’s adventures in *Gravity’s Rainbow* expresses less a desire to be dominated than a wish to be integrated in a stable conceptual framework. As Stefan Mattesiech argues, if the punch line of the dream about the golden screw “can be read as disclosing his unconscious wish, it isn’t only to be a machine [...] but also [...] to gain control over the machine he is”⁵¹⁷. Indeed, like Esther, he is “half victim, half in control” (V., 50). In this seemingly paradoxical wish, Benny clearly prefigures Tyrone Slothrop. Although *V.* does not yet feature the distinction between preterite and elect as a designation of power relations, what Joseph Slade observes in the context of *Gravity’s Rainbow* holds here as well: “Rationalized systems bind and afflict but also reward: the elect with power and money, the damned with order and

⁵¹⁵ John Dugdale considers this account as inspired by Adalbert von Chamisso’s novelette “*Peter Schlemihl* (1813), a comic *Faust* in which the hero sells his shadow to the Devil”. John Dugdale, *Thomas Pynchon: Allusive Parables of Power* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), 84.

⁵¹⁶ Fitzpatrick suggest in a Heideggerian reading of *V.* that “technology [...] promotes a functionalist epistemology that makes it impossible to read the world—or to read the self—except through technology’s own framework”. Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *The Anxiety of Obsolescence: The American Novel in the Age of Television* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006), 62. Benny verbalises this in his imaginary conversations with SHOCK and SHROUD: “with nuclear and subatomic physics a going thing, man had become something which absorbs X-rays” (V. 284).

⁵¹⁷ Stephan Mattesiech, *Lines of Flight: Discursive Time and Countercultural Desire in the Work of Thomas Pynchon* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 37.

security”.⁵¹⁸ Wondering if there was any kind of theory of history, for instance, Profane muses that

all political events: wars, governments and uprisings, have the desire to get laid as their roots; because history unfolds according to economic forces and the only reason anybody wants to get rich is so he can get laid steadily [...] (V., 214)

However abhorrent he finds this vision of inanimate money buying “inanimate warmth” (*ibid.*), his getting laid theory causes him to get an erection, which in turn, directs his attention to an the advertisement of an employment agency in the newspaper covering his crotch. The agency will later offer him a job at a research facility where he encounters two humanoid automata, SHOCK and SHROUD, who tell him (in their imaginary conversations) that they already are what “everybody will be someday” (V., 286). The point is not that Profane only aimlessly drifts from one version of perceived inhumanity, refusing to take any form of conscious control but that he, almost a living mechanism, whose “only function [is] to want” (V., 37), has himself directed. Only an instant before being offered the job as night watchman, does his tumescence subside, which is commented on as follows:

Any sovereign or broken yo-yo must feel like this after a short time of lying inert, rolling, falling: suddenly to have its own umbilical string reconnected, and know the other end is in hands it cannot escape. Hands it doesn't want to escape. Know that the simple clockwork of itself has no more need for symptoms of inutility, lonesomeness, directionlessness, because now it has a path marked out for it over which it has no control. That's what the feeling would be, if there were such things as animate yo-yos. (V., 217)

The marking of paths does not only provide Profane with predetermined parameters but equally relieves him from responsibility. This attitude comes most explicitly to the fore in his relation to women, who “happen” to Benny “like accidents” (V., 134), and each of whom demand of him in vain to get a grip on himself and his troubles. When he meets Fina, for instance, a secretary and spiritual leader of a youth gang, Benny happily considers himself “another means to grace or indulgence” (*ibid.*) for her. On being asked to make something out of himself, however, he is unable to accept that

⁵¹⁸ Joseph W. Slade, “Thomas Pynchon, Postindustrial Humanist”, *Technology and Culture* 23, no. 1 (1982): 65.

she insists on treating him as “a human being” rather than “just an object of mercy” (V., 137). In contrast to Mattesiech, I understand Benny’s refusal to commit to Fiona’s demands not as motivated by his intuition that the discourse of love is territorialised by an “Oedipalized social machine” but as a willing submission to the passivity required by the soteriological category of grace.⁵¹⁹ “I am a descendant of schlemihls, Job founded my line” (V., 224), Profane propounds, and his identification is conclusive as regards his renunciation of an active, responsible life: a schlemihl (etymologically derived from *shelômî* and *el*, ‘God is my salvation’) is a good-for-nothing, an unlucky person who always expects happiness and salvation to come from God.⁵²⁰ And as Benny muses: “A schlemihl is a schlemihl. What can you ‘make’ out of one?” (V., 147).

2. Devilish Intellect

Perhaps the mind’s a void? A void always asking for something that doesn’t exist?

—Paul Valéry, *Môn Faust*⁵²¹

The depiction of this state of affairs in *V.*’s diegetic present is accompanied by a second, and according to most critics central, thematic strand. The world of *V.* is not only one in which the Great Chain of Being has been replaced by a “long daisy chain of victimizers and victims, screwers and screwees” (V., 49), in which there is no essential difference between Catholic communities, tourism, and organised mob violence, but also one in which a holistic view of the world has given way to an “intolerable double vision” (V., 468) the two branches of which, the hermetically sealed ‘hothouse’, a closed system of absolute order and control, and the ‘street’, a vision of openness and contingency, are exploited by the political right and left. As

⁵¹⁹ Mattesiech, *Lines of Flight*, 38.

⁵²⁰ See Max Zeldner, “A Note on ‘Schlemiel’”, *The German Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (1953): 115-16. Benny’s attitude toward women is also revealing in this respect. He accepts them as agents of grace but dreads them as independent figures. On learning that some of his acquaintances seem to have intimate feelings for objects, for instance, he wonders whether “something had been going on under the rose” (V., 23). His suspicion appears to be validated by his friend Rachel’s fondness of her car: “She had climbed in the car and now lay hack in the driver’s seat, her throat open to the summer constellations. He was about to approach her when he saw her left hand snake out all pale to fondle the gearshift. He watched and noticed how she was touching it. [...] He didn’t want to see any more” (V., 29). What frightens Benny to the point of wanting to “vomit” (*ibid.*) is not an intimate relationship between human and technology per se, as his dream about “an all-electronic woman” (V., 385) indicates, but woman independent of man.

⁵²¹ Valéry, *Plays*, 58.

Christine Brooke-Rose observes, the multiplicity of interpretative systems emergent in an anthropocentric world make it impossible “to envisage a whole form of which the fragments would be part”.⁵²² Matching Deleuze and Guattari’s incredulity towards “the myth of the existence of fragments that [...] are merely waiting for the last one to be turned up, so that they may all be glued back together to create a unity”, Pynchon thereby presents not so much his dramatis personae as failed Platonists, as Molly Hite argues, but the futility of totalising gestures in general.⁵²³ Even when most needed, as the ‘lapsed’ priest and ex-modernist poet Maijstral observes, “there are no epiphanies [...], no moments of truth” (V., 337).⁵²⁴ Like in *The Recognitions*, total visions keep lingering around the corner in V., yet without ever appearing. This is not merely owed to anti-Platonism but equally to an opposition against normative theological narratives and a hostile attitude towards modernism, especially the latter’s insistence on a “quest for an authentic, higher reality beyond the arbitrary signs of culture”.⁵²⁵ Such radical negation of totalising knowledge indicates that the most fundamental and overarching theme of V. “is the inability to know”, as Alan W. Brownlie notes.⁵²⁶ Truth in V. (and even more so in *Gravity’s Rainbow*) is not an objective universal but dependent on power, that is, on those who pronounce and legitimise it, as Michel Foucault would have it.⁵²⁷ Yet the positing of this inability, in many respects a postmodern stance

⁵²² Christine Brook-Rose, *The Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure, Especially of the Fantastic* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 367.

⁵²³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (London: Continuum, 2004), 45; see also Molly Hite, “‘Holy-Center-Approaching’ in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon”, *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 12, no. 2 (1982): 128. Pynchon is indebted in this respect to Henry Adams’s stance that order is ‘the dream of man’; see Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography*, ed. Ira B. Nadel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 377. Adams’s influence on Pynchon is treated, for instance, in William M. Plater, Plater, *Grim Phoenix: Reconstructing Thomas Pynchon’s Work* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978); Dwight Eddins, *The Gnostic Pynchon* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Hite, *Ideas of Order*; Andrzej Kopcewicz, “The Machine in Henry Adams, Frank R. Stockton and Thomas Pynchon: A Paradigmatic Reading”, *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia* 29 (1994): 137–64.

⁵²⁴ When things “all at once to fall into a pattern” (V. 264) in aesthetic terms in V., they do only so in the midst of the inhumane; cf. Maarten van Delden, “Modernism, the New Criticism and Thomas Pynchon’s V.”, *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 23, no. 2 (1990): 123.

⁵²⁵ Mikhail Epstein, “Hyper in 20th Century Culture: The Dialectics of Transition from Modernism to Postmodernism”, *Postmodern Culture* 6, no. 2 (1996): § 5. As Cowart notes, the historical sequence in V. is “to be understood as a modernist invitation to reassemble the pieces and so recover a vision of cultural wholeness” (*Thomas Pynchon and the Dark Passages of History*, 43). For Pynchon’s treatment of modernism in relation to myth and order see Peter L. Cooper, *Signs and Symptoms: Thomas Pynchon and the Contemporary World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 208; see also Tanner (*Thomas Pynchon*, 55); Schaub (*Pynchon*, 71); and Slade (*Thomas Pynchon*, 186). As regards expressions of hostility towards modernism in his work see Dugdale (*Thomas Pynchon*, 109) and van Deelden (“Modernism, the New Criticism and Thomas Pynchon’s ‘V.’”).

⁵²⁶ Alan W. Brownlie, *Thomas Pynchon’s Narratives: Subjectivity and Problems of Knowing* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 8.

⁵²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

against modernity's "fantasy of pure and total vision",⁵²⁸ does not hinder the characters of *V.* from pursuing such knowledge. Faced with "epistemological barriers" and "superhumanly scaled atrocities" that constantly challenge their beliefs, if not sanity, as Cooper argues, they construct fictions in order to satisfy their need to understand.⁵²⁹ Unfortunately, the latter too readily results in apocalyptic visions that foster a Spenglerian fatalism.

Paradigmatic in this respect is Herbert Stencil Junior, the "century's child" (*V.*, 52), significantly 'motherless', a mock secret agent and historical detective in search of the great cabal that would reveal the organising principle of history and with that his own identity. In his quest into history, a mind-adventure "in the tradition of *The Golden Bough* or *The White Goddess*" (*V.*, 61), Stencil moulds a series of women associated by "an initial and a few dead objects" (*V.*, 445) into the ominous Lady *V.*, whom he believes to be the driving force behind a "Plot Which Has No Name" (*V.*, 226). One never learns who or what she is. Her accessories, an ivory comb, a wig, a tattoo of the crucifixion, prosthetic feet, a star sapphire in her navel, false teeth, and a glass eye with an iris in the shape of a clock, associate her equally with Gravesean goddess figures and Henry Adam's notion of the dynamo as the modern divinity. With both narratives shining through these associations, critics have suggested that she signifies lost spirituality and fertility in a purely industrialised and fetishised world.⁵³⁰ Observing the Lady *V.* merely from a purely mythical viewpoint, however, is problematic, not only because the old myths, as Tanner has observed, "no longer serve significantly to frame [...] the contemporary world" in Pynchon.⁵³¹ *V.*, who merely 'appears' in the Stencilised chapters and the epilogue of the novel, is never validated as a subject outside the ratiocinations of Stencil and his father. Like Godolphin's Vheissu, *V.* is a "symptom [...] always alive, somewhere in the world" (*V.*, 473), always in another version. Yet while *V.* may be in some respect a "free-floating signifier with a potentially inexhaustible range of reference", as Molly Hite argues, it is one with a clearly delimited purpose.⁵³² *V.*, as Tiina Käkälä-Puumala

⁵²⁸ Katrin Amian, *Rethinking Postmodernism(s): Charles S. Peirce and the Pragmatist Negotiations of Thomas Pynchon, Toni Morrison, and Jonathan Safran Foer* (Amsterdam/ New York: Rodopi, 2008), 94.

⁵²⁹ Cooper, *Signs*, 22.

⁵³⁰ Eddins has observed that Pynchon traces the decline of a "unifying symbol to a heuristic metaphor of no spiritual import", that is the fall of a Mother Goddess figure into an empty signifier (*The Gnostic Pynchon*, 54).

⁵³¹ Tanner, *Thomas Pynchon*, 55.

⁵³² Hite, *Ideas of Order*, 27.

notes, is not a person but an epistemological object that can only be “understood in relation to the strategies of power and knowledge” she exposes and enacts.⁵³³ Spengler’s *Decline of The West*, or more precisely the criticism it was subjected to, provides an illuminating parallel here. If Musil’s butterfly-analogy is to show that Spengler’s system reveals more about the observer than what is observed, Pynchon uses the same mechanism in the depiction of his Lady V. to lay bare the operative forces emergent in V.’s diegetic present. For this reason, it makes more sense for critics and readers to shift the “perspective from mysterious textual codes to creative subjects, or, more specifically, from V. as ‘pure signifier’ to Stencil as the signifier, ‘the one who signifies V.’”⁵³⁴ In his “adventure of the mind” Stencil resorts to a principle that would make “a good historical and poetic sense”, in Robert Graves’s terms.⁵³⁵ His simplification, coordination, and motivation of historical facts, however, his projection of a Spenglerian plot, soon turns into an exercise in historical determinism.

As much as Wyatt’s Puritan-cum-authoritarian upbringing takes place between the two World Wars, Stencil’s formative experience takes place during the “interregnum between kingdoms-of-death” (V., 54). At a first glance, V., whose different incarnations (under the names of Victoria Wren, Veronica Managnese, Vera Meroving, and the ‘Bad Priest’) appear at moments of historical crises between the Fashoda incident and the outbreak of the Second World War, demands to be read like an aetiology of the latter.⁵³⁶ Yet as Cowart points out, V. does not personify the Fascist *Zeitgeist*,⁵³⁷ and neither can she be read as a Caesarean force. Her presence at these events, if one can speak of V. as a single person, is merely accidental, and so are eventually the events themselves. What seems to be an active principle of ‘evil’ is eventually nothing but the absence of an ordering principle in history: her “particular

⁵³³ Tiina Käkälä-Puumala, “‘But What’s a Human, After All?’: Dehumanization in V.”, in *Blissful Bewilderment: Studies in the Fiction of Thomas Pynchon*, ed. Anne Mangen and Rolf Gaasland (Oslo: Novus Forlag: 2002), 18; cf. Cowart, *Thomas Pynchon and the Dark Passages of History*, 50.

⁵³⁴ Amian, *Rethinking Postmodernism(s)*, 73.

⁵³⁵ Graves, *White Goddess*, 136.

⁵³⁶ In the Stencilised chapter “V. in Love”, Victoria Wren (herself a lapsed Catholic and Faustian character), is being gradually replaced by V., something “entirely different for which the young century had as yet no name” (V., 410). What breaks out in her transformation will eventually locate her in the same “radius along with leather-winged Lucifer, Hitler, Mussolini” (V., 339), and the etiology of the Second World War, as Stencil holds, is “also her own” (V., 387).

⁵³⁷ Cowart, “Pynchon and the Sixties”, 7.

shape [was] governed only by the surface accidents of history at the time” (V., 155).⁵³⁸

The discrepancies between the entries in his father’s journals, where he comes in contact with V. for the first time, and his ratiocinations leave no doubt about the lengths to which Stencil will go to create order. Although Pynchon generally leaves it to characters such as Eigenvalue and Maijstral to comment on Stencil and his doings and them, the latter’s exposition in the novel—“the world adventurer [...] waggled his shoulderblades like wings” (V., 52)—is indicative enough, subtly associating him with the labyrinth builder Daedalus but also with “leather-winged Lucifer” (V., 339). Both Stencil’s mindset and such allusions suggest, as John Dugdale notes, a Freudian paranoid-cum-Faust.⁵³⁹ In his well-known study of Judge Daniel Schreber, Freud conceives of the ‘mechanism’ of paranoia as a withdrawal of the self’s libido from the outside world. In doing so, it collapses into itself, and everything outside becomes indifferent and irrelevant.⁵⁴⁰ Trying to establish new cathexes, the paranoid inhabits a complex delusional system with which he recreates the world in his “own image”, as it were, which is often informed by a “power-image” of the self.⁵⁴¹ Freud illustrates this mechanism with a quotation from Goethe’s *Faust* in which the scholar, cursing all human values, ‘destroys’ the world only to rebuild it in his bosom (F, 1617-21). Although Dugdale’s analysis should be taken *cum grano salis*, the characterisation of Stencil’s doings as megalomaniac is fairly precise.⁵⁴² Stencil withdraws all libido from the outside world (“what love there was for Stencil had become directed entirely inward”, V. 55) and opts, as Brownlie notes, “for Narcissism, acting safely within his own mind”.⁵⁴³ Stencil lives in a closed circle that precludes any access to being, but while characters like Hugh Godolphin eventually concede to their constructivism in terms of suspecting a genius driving the forces of history, Stencil’s vision “extends on past the threshold of sleep” (V., 323). Acting within a ‘hothouse’, as much as

⁵³⁸ As the “soul-dentist” Eigenvalue’s muses: “Perhaps history this century [...] is rippled with gathers in its fabric such that if we are situated, as Stencil seemed to be, at the bottom of a fold, it’s impossible to determine warp, woof or pattern anywhere else. [...] We are [...] lost to any sense of a continuous tradition. Perhaps if we lived on a crest, things would be different. We could at least see” (V., 155-56).

⁵³⁹ Dugdale, *Thomas Pynchon*, 15.

⁵⁴⁰ Frankland points to Schreber’s anticipation of an apocalypse, which is, according to Freud, a projection of this inner catastrophe (*Freud’s Literary Culture*, 13); cf. Adorno and Horkheimer: “For the ego which sinks into the meaningless abyss of itself, objects become allegories of destruction which contain the meaning of its own downfall” (DE, 192).

⁵⁴¹ Moore, *The Style of Connectedness*, 75.

⁵⁴² Neither is Freud’s reading of *Faust* is appropriate as a ‘diagnosis’ or a literary analysis nor does Pynchon grant the totalising and mechanistic Freudian framework much validity.

⁵⁴³ Brownlie, *Thomas Pynchon’s Narratives*, 17.

Gaddis's Wyatt does in his one-person re-enactment of the Flemish guild of painters, he seeks an absolute in the past with significance for and in the present. Conjuring up a merely *apparent* meaningfulness "of transhistorical connections",⁵⁴⁴ however, Stencil's reconstruction is a forcible dislocation from both present and past reality and as such also a "deeply reactionary retreat into methodology".⁵⁴⁵ Where Wyatt finds the parameters of perfection already pre-established in Flemish painting, Stencil uses the "traditional tools and attitudes" (V., 62) of espionage, employing a pseudo-scientific methodology of inference and ratiocination. Neither interested in objectivity nor in finding official data, since he "would rather depend on the imperfect vision of humans" (V., 388), Stencil disregards the impossibility of an objective view of history, what Hilary Putnam calls the 'God's eye point of view', but claims such a position for himself.⁵⁴⁶ In contrast to Wyatt, who tries to point to a point of view alternative to the single-minded materialism of his contemporaries by referring to God's gaze, Stencil consciously fosters a single vision in order to eliminate potential multiplicities that threaten to impede his agency. When he 'discovers' V., his previous "random movements", his apathy and irresolution, suddenly give way

to a great single movement from inertness to—if not vitality, then at least activity. Work, the chase—for it was V. he hunted—far from being a means to glorify God and one's own godliness (as the Puritans believe) was for Stencil grim, joyless [...] (V., 55)

Conceding that "V.'s is a country of coincidence ruled by a ministry of myth (V., 450), he seems to acknowledge an inseparable connection between accident and intention in history, yet he continues with a double consciousness of knowing that his pursuit is aimless while doing it nevertheless. The content of his search thereby appears ultimately irrelevant, for his work is to sustain a "sense of animateness" that he can hardly release, unwilling to think "about any end of the search. Approach and avoid" (V., 55). In this grim chase, V. exists to be hunted, to establish and maintain

⁵⁴⁴ Madsen, *The Postmodernist Allegories*, 30. Stencil's paranoid rationale is at least as fatalistically conservative as Schoenmaker's ethics, the Fascist dream-world of Foppl's villa, and the Whole Sick Crew's exercises in non-communication. V., as Fausto Maijstral notes, is "obsession after all, and that such an obsession is a hothouse: constant temperature, windless" (V., 448).

⁵⁴⁵ Smith, *Pynchon and History*, 21, 23.

⁵⁴⁶ The Kilroy graffiti Pynchon presents towards the end of the novel is an appropriate correlative to this. Just as Kilroy, first taken for an "objective onlooker" (V., 436) and then identified as a "masterful disguise: a metaphor", has "sprung into life, in truth, as part of a band-pass filter" (V., 436), Herbert's *Stencilisation* only extracts a narrow band of information.

Stencil as “He Who Looks For V.” (V., 226). History itself thereby “becomes an object to be manipulated” at will, as Fitzpatrick argues.⁵⁴⁷ Inscribing himself by “inference, poetic license, forcible dislocation of personality into a past he didn’t remember and had no right in” (V., 62), he projects his ego and will onto history, writing himself into its texture.⁵⁴⁸ In brief, it appears that Stencil’s quest is not one for knowledge as such but a mechanism of constructing a fiction of self beyond the limitations of the *conditio humana*, a fantasy of an evil genius presiding over the processes of history and of exerting control over this genius. He may be riddled by V., but he is also able to grant her attributes, “willing to let the key to his conspiracy have a few of the human passions” (V., 407), modelling her into a fetish construction, adding and subtracting features at will.⁵⁴⁹

Stencil even departed from his usual ploddings to daydream a vision of her now, at age seventy-six: skin radiant with the bloom of some new plastic; both eyes glass but now containing photoelectric cells, connected by silver electrodes to optic nerves of purest copper wire and leading to a brain exquisitely wrought as a diode matrix could ever be. (V., 411)

V. thereby becomes a purely determined organism and at the same time an idealised object of desire, unattainable and constantly deferred. Hence, such aspirations have little in common with the desire for “an absolute signified, an absolute meaning” that Rosemarie Jackson attributes to Faust.⁵⁵⁰ His agenda may not be Fascist like that of the engineer Kurt Mondaugen, whose embrace of Nazism out of discontent with the given I will discuss in the context of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Nevertheless, his historiographical imperialism, as it were,⁵⁵¹ and his creation of a ominous genius that simultaneously serves as a scapegoat (*cherchez la femme!*), are close to the political paranoia described by Hofstadter or in Adorno and Horkheimer’s “Elements of Anti-Semitism”.⁵⁵² Moreover, his obsessively ordering random “cluster[s] of phenomena”

⁵⁴⁷ Fitzpatrick, *The Anxiety of Obsolescence*, 80. Smith argues in a similar manner that Stencil’s way of seeing history is “also a way of shaping or defining reality” (*Pynchon and History*, 21).

⁵⁴⁸ See Berressem, *Pynchon’s Poetics*, 53, and Fitzpatrick, *The Anxiety of Obsolescence*, 79.

⁵⁴⁹ For V. as a fetish construction of Stencil, see Chambers, *Thomas Pynchon*, 58-59.

⁵⁵⁰ Jackson, *Fantasy*, 179.

⁵⁵¹ See Dugdale, *Thomas Pynchon*, 121.

⁵⁵² Adorno and Horkheimer write: “Since the paranoiac perceives the world about him only as it corresponds to his blind purposes, he can only repeat his own self [...] The naked pattern of power as such, which dominates all around it as well as its own decomposing ego, seizes all that is offered to it, and incorporates it, without reference to its specific nature, into its mythic fabric. The closed circle of eternal sameness becomes a substitute for omnipotence. [...] The madman remains a mocking image of divine power. Just as his sovereign gestures completely lack any creative power in reality, so, like the

(V., 154) into a “grand Gothic pile of inferences” (V., 226), as Zofia Kolbuszewska observes, “awakens the ghosts of modern European civilization and by idealizing, renders its lethal tendencies innocent”.⁵⁵³ Such implications are all the more urgent because Pynchon suggests that the organising principle behind Stencil’s identity is also that of his time.⁵⁵⁴ The nature and amount of control he “exercises in creating” V. clearly points to “the foundations of his control in the culture he is part of”.⁵⁵⁵

3. Soul-Selling as Liberation: “The Confession of Fausto Maijstral”

Phenomena must once and for all be removed from their gloomy empirical-mechanical-dogmatic torture chamber and submitted to the jury of plain common sense.

—Goethe, *Maxims and Reflections*⁵⁵⁶

Stencil’s exhausted soaring above the dust finds a complementary half in the confessions of his “figurative brother”, the Maltese poet Fausto Maijstral.⁵⁵⁷ Fausto’s poetic documentation of the events on Malta during the Second World War is a *mise en abyme* of the whole novel. The text serves him as an inquiry into what he considers in hindsight as sin and a loss of his humanity, and as a “poetic function” (V., 321), to appropriate his expression, it negotiates the two-edged character of the human gift for constructing fictions in order to cope with an apparently meaningless world. As an expression of such ambivalence, it eventually also poses a challenge to the reader’s own sense of recognition. A highly contradictory palimpsest of poems, journal entries and annotations written at different stages of Fausto’s life, it undercuts any notion of continuity and coherence to such an extent that it has prompted Judith Chambers to argue that any reading of it will be a misreading.⁵⁵⁸ Yet while one might dismiss his writings as the record of his increasing madness, possibly even ‘edited’ by another madman, Stencil, they are, like the latter’s concoctions, a fruitful basis for examining

devil, he is without the attributes of the principle which he usurps: conscious love and peaceful freedom” (DE, 190, 191-92).

⁵⁵³ Zofia Kolbuszewska, *The Poetics of Chronotope in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon* (Lublin: Learned Society of the Catholic University of Lublin, 2000), 50.

⁵⁵⁴ See Berressem, *Pynchon’s Poetics*, 53.

⁵⁵⁵ Amian, *Rethinking Postmodernism(s)*, 94; cf. Dugdale, who considers Stencil’s approach as symptomatic of the US in the Dulles-McCarthy era (*Thomas Pynchon*, 121).

⁵⁵⁶ Goethe, *Maxims and Reflections*, 55.

⁵⁵⁷ Slade, *Thomas Pynchon*, 52.

⁵⁵⁸ Chambers, *Thomas Pynchon*, 83.

the forces Fausto is exposed to and the strategies the poet devises in order to account for these events.

Fausto, whose name of course alludes to the myth, falls victim to Faustian Westerns in two respects: firstly as a torn soul engendered by the irreconcilable clash of Maltese and British imperialist culture and secondly as a victim of Fascist military expansionism. Initially “slated to be the priest” (V., 306), Maijstral dithers in his youth between Caesarism and religion and eventually renounces priesthood in favour of becoming a poet, a part of the “grand School of Anglo-Maltese Poetry—the Generation of ’37” (V., 305), a group of friends educated in the language of the British colonisers and inspired by Pound, Eliot, and Yeats.⁵⁵⁹ Fausto impregnates and later marries Elena (Helena) Xamxi. Their “terrible misalliance” (V., 314), as she calls it, produces his daughter Paola, an incident, coinciding with the outbreak of the war, that marks the emergence of Fausto’s second ‘character’. Fausto II considers himself rendered by British Colonialism “a dual man, aimed two ways at once: towards peace and simplicity on the one hand, towards an exhausted intellectual searching on the other” (V., 309). He makes this duality appear as a matter of linguistic determinism but also an irreconcilable dilemma, an abyss between two realities. These two realities are put to the test during the endless air raids in the Siege and thereby come to represent two polar extremes of how to live through this state:

To be merely Maltese: endure almost mindless, without sense of time? Or to think—continuously—in English, to be too aware of war, of time [...] (V., 309)

Striking is not only the Manichean quality of Maijstral’s hybridity but also the valorisation of both halves of his ‘soul’. Educated in English, he conceives the Maltese part of himself as subaltern, a depraved ‘uncultivated’ form of life “at the threshold of consciousness” (V., 309). Having neither a concept of metaphor nor a vocabulary as ‘rich and subtle’ as English, not even a word for *mind*, the Maltese language appears to him as a restricted ‘animal’ code unsuitable for poetry and meaningful communication. Nevertheless, he sees in the temporal orientation of Western thought and language a comparable shortcoming. While “English and its emotional nuances” may be better suited for the requirements of his vocation, he assesses his education in the language as a “curse” that “alloyed what was pure in us”

⁵⁵⁹ See *ibid.*, 86.

(*ibid.*). Questions of linguistic determinism aside, it is the two modes of temporality that come to be crucial in Fausto's negotiation of humanity. Fausto's preoccupation with time establishes a link with the novel's repeated treatment of temporality, specifically 'clockwork time' as an expression of a mechanistic understanding of the universe and as a symbol of entropic processes, like in the Mondaugen chapter. Yet it also establishes a clear link to the tradition of the Faust myth beyond Spenglerian resonances.⁵⁶⁰

Confronted with the question of how to stay sane in a universe of sheer contingency, both halves of Fausto wish for integration into a greater order that would provide him with the means to cope. Challenged by constant bombings, the poet and his island are in 'retreat', hammered "inch by inch" (V., 317) into the sea and desperation. Distancing himself from his British part, he begins to drift into religious abstraction, "towards that island-wise sense of communion" he considers "the lowest form of consciousness" (V., 315). Significant here is a 'pact' he makes with God. Although doubting that the war can be reconciled with notions of theodicy, he never does anything "so complex as drift away" (V., 330) from the divinity. Mocked by the radical poet-engineer Dnubietna (Maltese for 'our sins') as an apostate, he purports to have made an "agreement" (V., 328) with God specifying that if he ceases to question and simply survives, he will be forgiven his renunciation of the priesthood. This agreement is to vouchsafe that the divinity suspends the "laws of chance" by which

⁵⁶⁰ Plater notes, unfortunately without providing details, some "similarities between Fausto and his artistic counterpart in Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*", the most conspicuous of which is that both are rather representations of ideas than conventionally 'realistic' characters (*The Grim Phoenix*, 46). Serracino-Ingloft, on the other hand, sees a correlation between Fausto's notes on temporality and the discussion of art and time in *Doctor Faustus* ("The Faustus of Malta", 40). A brief clarification seems to be in order. As shown in the analysis of *The Recognitions*, the association artist-Faust by far exceeds the context of Mann's novel, and while the characteristic of representing ideas rather than being 'realistic' figures holds not only for most Fausts but also for most of Pynchon's characters. Secondly, the stress on time is, again, as crucial a component of the Faust myth as of many sources of Pynchon's early work, say, Wiener, Spengler, or Brown. Obviously, like in *Doctor Faustus*, art and the political merge in Fausto's confessions. There are, however, crucial differences as regards the micro-politics of both artists. Fausto is not taken to poetic heights by diabolical inspiration but driven, like Leverkühn's precursors, by curiosity, and his infatuation with Anglo-Saxon modernist poetry is followed by disillusionment and an increased colonial awareness. The most striking parallel between the two artists is their attitude toward the function of elements (notes, metaphors) of their craft. Like Leverkühn, Fausto "breaks through" to a new artistic paradigm that utilises its elements in a novel way, but, again, his narrative is inverted to that of Adrian. While the latter wants to resolve "music's magical essence into human reason" (DF, 207), Fausto purports to bereave language of its metaphysical characteristics (V. 318). Moreover, while Mann, following Adorno, describes a reversal of free music into subjugation on formal grounds, Fausto, following Robbe-Grillet, describes liberation from the enchainning universality invested in figurative speech. Fausto's break with metaphor restricts the value attributed to figurative speech outside its use as a "device". Eventually, his poetological stance rejects any 'logical' relations and thereby determinism therefore deviates crucially from Leverkühn's.

Fausto could be killed during an air raid (V., 330). In order to keep a “working relevancy to God” and to simply survive, he thus continues jury-rigging. Only later will he realise that he has devised a fiction and that “the old covenants, the old agreements” have to “change too” (*ibid.*).

Concomitant with his religious retreat is a retreat into poetry (V., 315). The poems he and his friends write in this phase, nationalistic and romantic, conflate the island’s past with its present, glossing the Siege with imagery of the first Siege of Malta (1565), “when personal combat was more equal, when warfare could at least be gilded with an illusion of honour” (V., 316). This evocation, highly reminiscent of Huizinga’s description of the consoling “illusion of a [...] heroic life” (WMA, 78) that finds expression in Gaddis’s deluded painter, is also a “wish-fulfillment” in that it establishes an illusion of the “true absence of time” (V., 316). The Maltese sense of “timelessness”, as Serracino-Inglott explains, “reflects the dominant Muslim occasionalism – the view that, apart from God’s will, there is no historical continuity in the sense of a causally connected chain between one event and another, but only a sequence of critical moments”.⁵⁶¹ Yet in this belief in God’s will lies also the belief that redemption is still possible amidst the ‘random’ incidents of war. Fausto II notes in his journal during the Italian air raids:

There is, we are taught, a communion of saints in heaven. So perhaps on earth, also in this Purgatory, a communion: not of gods or heroes, merely men expiating sins they are unaware of [...] (V., 315)

With the notion of communion in Purgatory Fausto can, paradoxically, believe that when “the bombs fall” he is “sheltered” (V., 316).

Opposed to the Maltese sense of timelessness is the “other great image” (*ibid.*) capturing the imagination of the Maltese community, the Western narrative of entropic decline. Sharing with the other literati a “sensitivity to decadence”, Fausto perceives of the island’s history as a “slow apocalypse” (V., 317), an approximation to a state when humanity would “be finally subject to the laws of physics” (V., 321). This image emanates from Dnubietna, who, driven by tastes running to “apocalypse in full gallop”, creates a world in which such ‘truth’ has “precedence” over anything else (V., 316). Their apocalyptic sensitivity, however, is more than a way of making

⁵⁶¹ Serracino-Inglott, “The Faustus of Malta”, 43.

sense of the world, as a reading from the perspective of Frank Kermode's *Sense of an Ending* would imply.⁵⁶² First of all, it expresses scepticism against the religious narrative that presents the war as "a great struggle between the laws of man and the laws of God" (V., 321). Moreover, it is ethically charged as 'decadence', as a "falling" (V., 317) into death and "non-humanity", which Fausto associates with the matriarchy represented by his island: "Mothers are closer than anyone to accident" (V., 321). The latter association is striking. On the one hand, it can be read as embedded in the manifold references to Malta as a formerly matriarchal island, in images of fertility and female deities. On the other hand, it also betrays a certain anxiety about losing (male) control.⁵⁶³

Fausto's "delusions of grandeur regarding the importance of poetry", as Fitzpatrick argues, and his illusions about chivalry and masculinity enable him to continue during the Siege.⁵⁶⁴ Yet his notion of the poet as exempt from the 'power' of language eventually brings his downfall from abstraction to "the most real state of affairs" (V., 317), the non-humanity of Fausto III. At the root of this reversal, as Serracino-Inglott notes, is a Faustian wager, the refusal to "accept the process of diminution to the zero-point" and receive the divine gift of grace offered to those willingly embracing death, that is, to give up the present fulfilment of desire for the "sake of a hypothetical future".⁵⁶⁵ This logic is expressed in early literary versions of the myth in the devil's function as a seller of time. Faust is granted a certain period of service at the cost of his eternal soul. Fausto does not strictly follow this logic, but the basic principle remains: the war exhausts his poetic and intellectual abilities, and he trades in his notion of finding the eternal life promised (as his notion of purgatory and his imagined agreement with God indicate) for an illusion of strength and immortality that enables him to explore the realm of death on the island's surface. Like in most

⁵⁶² As Kermode notes, the "paradigms of apocalypse" are "ways of making sense of the world"; they are fictions depending "on a concord of imaginatively recorded past and imaginatively predicted future, achieved on behalf of us, who remain 'in the midst'" (*The Sense of an Ending*, 28, 8). In this context, Cornis-Pope relates Fausto's duality to two models of history, a teleological one and one that acknowledges contingencies. Marcel Cornis-Pope "Rethinking Postmodern Liminality: Marginocentric Characters And Projects in Thomas Pynchon's Polysystemic Fiction", *symplokê* 5, no. 1/2 (1997): 33. See also Elias's brief discussion of models of history in Pynchon ("History", 127).

⁵⁶³ See Huyssen, who notes: "although woman had traditionally been seen as standing in a closer relationship to nature than man, nature itself, since the 18th century, had come to be interpreted as a gigantic machine. Woman, nature, machine had become a mesh of significations which had all one thing in common: otherness; by their very existence they raised fears and threatened male authority and control" (*After the Great Divide*, 70). I think these two impulses meet in Fausto's conception of history as entropic and related to mother rule.

⁵⁶⁴ Fitzpatrick, *The Anxiety of Obsolescence*, 51.

⁵⁶⁵ Serracino-Inglott, "The Faustus of Malta", 47.

versions of Faust, however, this liberating move has more than a “propensity for dialectic reversal” (DF, 203), to use Leverkühn’s words.

A key to this reversal is found in Fausto’s encounter with the Bad Priest. The Priest, who according to rumours confederates with the “Dark One” and is “prowling for souls” (V., 313), makes his first appearance when he lures the pregnant Elena into confession.⁵⁶⁶ ‘Sin’, also that of sex outside wedlock, as Fausto implies, has hitherto been for Elena “as natural a function as breathing” (*ibid.*). Under the influence of the Bad Priest, however, it takes on the “shape of an evil spirit; alien, parasitic, attached like a black slug to her soul” (V., 314). Appropriating the notion of the nun as the spouse of Christ, he tries, using highly eroticised language, to lure Elena into entering a convent and be cured of her “spirit’s cancer” (*ibid.*), that is, her child. During the Siege he appears again and uses the population’s fear of pain and weakness for propagating the abandonment of all that is human:

The girls he advised to become nuns, avoid the sensual extremes—pleasure of intercourse, pain of childbirth. The boys he told to find strength in—and be like—the rock of their island [...] preaching that the object of male existence was to be like a crystal: beautiful and soulless. (V., 340)⁵⁶⁷

On hearing about the Bad Priest’s technocratic “Sermon on the Mount”,⁵⁶⁸ the Catholic Maltese Father Avalanche muses:

“God is soulless? [...] Having created souls, He Himself has none? So that to be like God we must allow to be eroded the soul in ourselves? Seek mineral symmetry, for there is eternal life: the immortality of rock. Plausible. But apostasy.” (V., 340)

⁵⁶⁶ Elena’s encounter with the Bad Priest resembles the Cathedral scene in *Faust* (3776-3834). Both Gretchen and Elena conceive a child outside wedlock, and, troubled by their pregnancy, seek spiritual consolation. In Goethe’s text the Evil Spirit (representing torment) convinces that Margareta has fallen from grace, which eventually drives her to desperation and child murder (cf. Schöne, *Faust*, 2.339).

⁵⁶⁷ In *Gravity’s Rainbow* the idea of rookhood is employed in a similar way. One of the Argentine Gauchos, Felipe, thinks of a rock that embodies an “intellectual system, for he believes (as do M. F. Beal and others) in a form of mineral consciousness not too much different from that of plants and animals, except for the time scale” (GR, 612). In the context of Felipe’s idea this stretched perception of time (“frames per century”, *ibid.*) is connected to ideas of survival and persistence; yet, it remains ambivalent. Weisenburger, for instance, relates this to Mary F. Beal’s short story “Gold”, in which the idea of ‘mineral consciousness’ represents the achievement of mystical powers and perfection but is also a clear allegory of the final victory of death (*A ‘Gravity’s Rainbow’ Companion*, 316).

⁵⁶⁸ See Smith, *Pynchon and History*, 47.

Maijstral remains elusive whether he himself subscribes to the Priest's message but eventually he comes to accept the non-humanity of inanimate rock as a key to human strength. Malta and her inhabitants, he writes, doubting any notion of theodicy and divine scheme,

stood like an immovable rock in the river Fortune, now at war's flood. The same motives which cause us to populate a dream-street also cause us to apply to a rock human qualities like "invincibility," "tenacity," "perseverance," etc. More than metaphor, it is delusion. But on strength of this delusion Malta survived.

Manhood on Malta thus became increasingly defined in terms of rockhood. This had its dangers for Fausto. (V., 325)

The confessing Fausto is aware that the wish to overcome vulnerability and to gain some "sense of home or safety" (V., 324) also underlies the power of identification with the inanimate, and he is eager to point out the perils entailed in metaphoric transfer. The poet is painfully aware, Maijstral holds in the manner of Robbe-Grillet, that metaphor has "no value apart from its function" as a device (V., 326):⁵⁶⁹

while others may look on the laws of physics as legislation and God as a human from with beard [...], Fausto's kind are alone with the task of living in a universe of things which simply are, and cloaking that innate mindlessness with comfortable and pious metaphor, so that the "practical" half of humanity may continue in the Great Lie, confident that their machines, dwellings, streets [...] share the same humane motives [...] as they. (*Ibid.*)

Yet Fausto II is not immune from this "Lie" and succumbs to the illusion of rockhood as a metaphoric shield against despair. This is Faust succumbing to the promise of Mephistopheles, the renouncement of everything spiritual for the sake of strength.⁵⁷⁰ What is of immediate benefit, however, soon turns as its opposite, for his renouncement of human frailty comes at the cost of Fausto's humanity. Alienated, he begins to "detect signs of lovely inanimateness in the world around him" (V., 322), and while "everything civilian and with a soul" goes underground (V., 323), he roams the streets during the raids, leaving his wife and child alone. What eventually drives

⁵⁶⁹ See Dugdale, *Thomas Pynchon*, 94.

⁵⁷⁰ Jackson's reads the Mephistophelian principle in *Faust* as a representative of Thanatos, the death wish that is also a "move towards stability" (*Fantasy*, 80).

him is a wish to know. Valuing his vocation as poet as higher than his obligation toward other humans, he feels compelled to explore extremes:

in dream there are two worlds: the street and under the street. One is the kingdom of death and one of life. And how can a poet live without exploring the other kingdom, even if only as a kind of tourist? (V., 325)

On one of these tours, Fausto becomes witness to an incident that will whirl him into his third incarnation, that closest to the non-humanity of the debris (V., 307), from which he will only slowly resurface to humanity. The children of Malta, having lost their faith in theodicy during raids, project (with a Maltese proclivity toward literality) their sense of betrayal by God onto the Bad Priest. Chance provides them with an opportunity to vent their anger when they find him trapped under a fallen beam in an abandoned cellar. The children take the Priest apart, taking from ‘him’ several items identified with previous ‘incarnations’ of the Lady V., until they have laid bare a young woman under the prosthetic layers of combs, wigs, false limbs and a glass eye. Fausto observes the scene without intervening, which allows for the Priest’s death but also the children’s “complete loss of innocence”, as Chambers notes.⁵⁷¹

Although the events on the Day of the 13 Raids have “no clear lines drawn” (V., 322), Fausto knows later that his behaviour was caused by a sensitivity that suggests he has succumbed to a similar temptation preached by the Bad Priest. His hesitation is neither motivated by hatred nor by pity but, as he assumes later, by a “passiveness. The characteristic stillness, perhaps, of the rock” (V., 445). He conceives of his failed intervention as a sin committed out of a mindset that is already as non-human as Fausto III will be. The confessor writes: “I know of machines that are more complex than people. [...] To have humanism we must first be convinced of our humanity” (V., 322). Eddins argues that this “transvaluation of the machine” is a “falling away from the ‘true’ religion centered upon the spiritual potential of the animate as manifested in humanity”, in brief, an embracement of the “inanimate heresy”.⁵⁷² I would agree, were Fausto’s statement not aimed at evaluating the transvaluation of the human through the concept of rockhood. The logic behind this is still a matter of technological rationality, a theme Pynchon returns to in Laszlo Jamf’s propagation of

⁵⁷¹ Chambers, *Thomas Pynchon*, 89.

⁵⁷² Eddins, *The Gnostic Pynchon*, 58.

crystalline strength in *Gravity's Rainbow*. The point Fausto makes in this specific context, however, is that the willed identification of manhood and rockhood on Malta may enable the island to persevere, but that it simultaneously reduces the self-image of the Maltese to a degree at which such 'complex' concepts as humanism are deemed impossible. It is only after the Priest has been stripped of all inanimate features and the children have left that Fausto acknowledges his obligation and commits himself to care, yet again, not as a human but in his 'office' as priest, offering to pray for her. Inferring from her inchoate sounds "regrets" of having sinned and the fear of having lost "Him", Fausto administers extreme unction and stays with her until she dies.

The "Confessions" end antithetically to Goethe's text. While in *Faust* religion and science are unable to provide a unified concept of the world, urging the striving scholar to resort to magic's assistance, the claims of both are perceived to be too horrifying in *V.* since their universalism introduces absolutism and determinism. The poetic view Fausto resorts to is also antithetical to the performative act of magic that calls facts and circumstances into being. Thus, while Stencil seeks a single genius behind history, Fausto dismisses the notion of the human face and embraces the idea that the world merely is, and the poet's calling is to exist in such a world, recording its truth:

"Truth" I mean, in the sense of attainable accuracy. No metaphysics. Poetry is not communication with angels or with the "subconscious". It is communication with the guts, genitals and five portals of sense. Nothing more. (V., 318)

As regards his relation to history, Fausto's agenda is similar. Considering memory "a traitor: gilding, altering [...] based as it is on the false assumption that identity is single, soul continuous" (V., 307), he dismisses any notion of continuity in both history and personal identity. In doing so, he act antithetically to Gaddis's Wyatt, who purportedly seeks unity in God, and Herbert Stencil, who forges unity in his secular self-apotheosis. Ironically, Pynchon presents this acquisition of 'truth', or clarity, as a matter of soul-selling:

So we do sell our souls: paying them away to history in little installments. It isn't so much to pay for eyes clear enough to see past the fiction of continuity, the fiction of cause and effect, the fiction of a humanized history endowed with 'reason'. (V., 306)

These words ironically invoke Goethe's *Faust*, especially the latter's discontent with theological and scientific and explanations of the world. Their message, however, points to the exact opposite of the impulse that drives Faust to his pact. Rather than vainly seeking binding principles, a force holding together the universe, Fausto dismisses the assumption that even a concept such as unity or continuity could exist. Arguing from a Wittgensteinian perspective, Serracino-Inglott sees in this gesture a "withdrawal of the Hegelian claim that the universe as a whole has a substantial unity of rational nature constituted by its empirically discoverable orientation in a given direction".⁵⁷³ According to the Western narrative Fausto's British half subscribes to this direction is clearly one of decline, so it is no wonder that Fausto frees himself from the fear of these processes by choosing an artistic perception of the world.⁵⁷⁴

While critics have pointed out possible relations to Robbe-Grillet's anti-humanist theory of metaphors or Wittgenstein's logical positivism behind this agenda, the distinctly Nietzschean tenor of these lines is generally overlooked. Fausto's statement of soul-selling refers to three thematic areas pivotal to Nietzsche's work on epistemology and historiography: the identification of reason as 'fictitious' (*The Will To Power*, § 12b), the renunciation of cause and effect (*ibid.*, § 551), and humanised history.⁵⁷⁵ In the second essay of *Untimely Meditations*, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life", Nietzsche argues that man's ability to act depends on his ability to forget, to brace "himself against the great and ever greater pressure of what is past".⁵⁷⁶ Nietzsche opens his discussion with a comparison between the unhistorical life of the animal contained in the present and eventually divested of meaningful action through the inability to remember or plan with the human historical sense, which, taken to insomniac extremes, is unwholesome in that it discourages men to act. Nietzsche relates these modes not only to individuals but also to entire cultures. Discussing the perceived inability of German culture to fully flower, for instance, he

⁵⁷³ Serracino-Inglott, "The Faustus of Malta", 48.

⁵⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷⁵ See Brownlie's discussion of Nietzsche in the context of *Gravity's Rainbow* (Thomas Pynchon's *Narratives*, 125-26) and Vaihinger's extension of Nietzsche's argument that "'Cause' and 'Effect' must not erroneously be made concrete . . . they should be used only as pure concepts, i.e., as conventional fictions for the purpose of defining, understanding and explaining . . . It is we ourselves who have invented the causes . . . interdependence, relativity, compulsion, number, law, freedom, end: and when we read this sign-world into things as something really existing and mix it up with them, we are merely doing what we have always done, namely mythologizing" (*The Philosophy of 'As if'*, 354, citing Friedrich Nietzsche, *Collected Letters*, 14:33).

⁵⁷⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, trans. R. J. Hollindale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 61.

cites Grillparzer's statement that the predominance of Shakespeare partly undercut the development of modern culture: "Shakespeare has ruined all of us moderns".⁵⁷⁷ The very same logic stands behind Fausto's dictum, which Pynchon seems to have taken from Nietzsche, that "Shakespeare and T.S. Eliot ruined us all" (V., 308). The cultural past, cherished by Eliot (see, for instance, "Tradition and the individual talent"), hinders development. What is needed, in Nietzsche's opinion, then, is the ability to forget without drifting into an eternal present.⁵⁷⁸ Nietzsche continues his discussion with a distinction between three historical modes, the monumental, the antiquarian, and the critical mode.⁵⁷⁹ The monumental conceives of history as a repository of the deeds of great personalities, the antiquarian the present as a culmination of the past. Hayden White relates these modes to metonymy and synecdoche: "By means of Metonymy men create agents and agencies *behind* phenomena; by means of Synecdoche they endow these agents and agencies with specific qualities, and most especially the *quality of being something other than what they are*".⁵⁸⁰ This describes very concisely Stencil's assumption of an agent behind history and Fausto's reference to history with a human face. Nietzsche introduces a third historical mode, the critical, that follows the human impulse to break up with the past in order to live. The critical historian brings history "before the tribunal, scrupulously examining it and finally condemning it".⁵⁸¹ As White notes, he "possesses the power to penetrate through the myths of past greatness and values [...] and to deny the claims of the past on the present".⁵⁸² Ironically, Nietzsche illustrates this attitude with the words of Mephistopheles: "For all that exists is *worthy* of perishing. So it would be better if nothing existed".⁵⁸³

Nietzsche neither describes this critical (in White's nomenclature *ironic*) mode in metaphysical terms nor as entirely positive (for its most radical manifestation, the conscious total devaluation of history for the sake of the present, leaves man equally without orientation). Yet the concept can be used to elucidate Maijstral's turn. Where "soul" (as personal identity and as history as the world-soul) becomes an oppressive

⁵⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁵⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁵⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁵⁸⁰ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 335, cf. 357.

⁵⁸¹ Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 76.

⁵⁸² White, *Metahistory*, 350.

⁵⁸³ Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 76.

construct, soul-selling becomes a critical mode of liberation, of assuming and rejecting “successive identities [...] by the writer as a function of linear time” (V., 306). A closer examination of Fausto’s allegedly metaphor-free and discontinuous universe against this background also reveals that he has by no means entirely abandoned such concepts, not even the (remote) notion of personhood.⁵⁸⁴ Contrary to his poetological demand, he exchanges the metonymic conception of history with a human face for one that is, strictly speaking, metaphorical (i.e. analogical):

The present Fausto can look nowhere but back on the separate stages of his own history. No continuity. No Logic. ‘History,’ Dnubietna wrote, ‘is a step-function.’ (V., 331)

Just like Dnubietna conceptually frames history as a “step-function”, Fausto reads his own life as a succession of stages engendered by random incidents (the outbreak of the war, the Day of the 13 Raids, the encounter with the Bad Priest).⁵⁸⁵ Ironically, Fausto even resorts in this viewpoint to the renounced logic of cause and effect by considering Fausto II as “generated” and Fausto IV as “produced” out of external events. Fausto does thereby not fully propound that the world is entirely without cause and effect.⁵⁸⁶ Moreover, he does not aspire to an entirely atemporal state but chooses a pattern of analogies as a heuristic horizon within which to act.⁵⁸⁷ History, in this view, ceases to be subject of mechanistic or organicist explanations and is presented, in a Nietzschean manner, as a series of moments related to the former and determined by the actions of the agents present at the time, yet without resorting to

⁵⁸⁴ As Bell argues, “there is no Archimedian point of literal meaning, such as Fausto imagines, from which to control the metaphorical” (*Literature, Modernism, and Myth*, 208).

⁵⁸⁵ One can see here a relation to the turn to metaphorical mode of historical thought demanded by Nietzsche. As White writes: “The return of historical thought to the Metaphorical mode will permit liberation from all efforts to find any definitive meaning in history. The elements of the historical field will be seen to lend themselves to combination in an infinite number of ways, in the same way that the elements of perception do to the free artist. The important point is that the historical field be regarded, in the same way that the perceptual field is, as an occasion for image-making, not as matter for conceptualisation. In the process, the very notion of a historical semantics is obliterated. [...] The dissolution of the notion of a historical semantics is, at the same time, the dissolution of the dream of a method by which history-in-general can be endowed with any sense at all. [...] Historical representation becomes once more all *story*, no plot, no explanation, no ideological implication at all— [...] ‘myth’ in its original meaning as Nietzsche understood it, ‘fabulation’” (*Metahistory*, 372).

⁵⁸⁶ See in this context also Nietzsche’s argument that “without accepting the fictions of logic, without measuring reality against the wholly invented world of the unconditioned and self-identical, without a constant falsification of the world through numbers, people could not live – that a renunciation of false judgments would be a renunciation of life, a negation of life”. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, ed. Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 7.

⁵⁸⁷ See Bell, *Literature, Modernism, and Myth*, 33; Serracino-Inglott, “The Faustus of Malta”, 48.

teleology and determinism.⁵⁸⁸ Fausto's trope of soul-selling, in turn, is thereby less a renunciation of metaphoricality or causality but a dismissal of teleological models available for political agendas: it is not the Maltese literal-mindedness but the narrative of decline and decadence that opens the gates to the Bad Priest's propagation of strength and immortality. Thus, the anti-humanistic bias as expressed in Fausto's poetology and historiography can become a critique of the imperial dominion of all too human British culture.⁵⁸⁹

While Stencil has to learn painfully that he "has never encountered history at all, but something more appalling (V., 450), that is, his own imagination, and finally ends, like V., as a "remarkably scattered concept" (V., 389), Fausto passes the "acid test" (V., 324), while staying 'sane' in a meaningless world. If Pynchon uses the quest motif in Stencil's case as a "calculated assault" on fatalism, as David Cowart points out,⁵⁹⁰ then Fausto's claim as regards his own personal history—"No continuity. No Logic" (V., 331)—needs to be read with equal suspicion, for Fausto's renunciation of continuity and teleology is also part of the strategy he devises to come to terms with his "sin of omission" (V., 345). Michael Begnal argues that "Fausto may keep too cool as he watches the children dismantle the inanimate Bad Priest, but he cares enough to offer the rites of confession to the victim and to deplore his own passivity".⁵⁹¹ Fausto's immediately apologetic tone, however, indicates that the confessor feels "guilty of murder" (V., 345). The confessing Fausto is still haunted by guilt. Never quite abandoning his theological education, and never quite turning away from God, the notion of being in the world to expiate sins accompanies Fausto throughout his successive incarnations, and he incessantly tries to relate his experiences during the Siege with his former actions, his renunciation of the office, his marriage to Elena, and later his administration of extreme unction. Since he considers his apologia a "first step in exorcising the sense of sin" (V., 447) that hangs with him, his rejection of former selves and their actions is thereby also a part of this exorcism. To argue from the standpoint of Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*, bad

⁵⁸⁸ See White, *Metafiction*, 363. Noteworthy here is Berressem's observation on phenomenological issues (such as paranoia) in Pynchon: "Through perceptual reduction and pattern recognition we gain agency". Hanjo Berressem, "Coda: How to read Pynchon", in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 174.

⁵⁸⁹ See Donald Brown, "Uncanny Confession: Thomas Pynchon's Fausto Maijstral", *Modern Language Studies* 29, no. 2 (1999): 60.

⁵⁹⁰ Cowart, *Thomas Pynchon*, 100.

⁵⁹¹ Michael H. Begnal, "Thomas Pynchon's V.: In Defense of Benny Profane", *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 9, no. 2 (1979): 67.

conscience is nothing but the inability to accept one's past deeds as one's own, that is, the impulse to see them as acts of another agent.⁵⁹² Fausto attempts to create a new version of 'self' dislocated from these actions, as if he could achieve to become a linguistic simulacrum of the 'new man' in St. Paul's sense. Yet Fausto's account ends in resignation, and when he tells Stencil years later "We are western men" (V., 451), his words bear a distinctly Spenglerian connotation. He may, like Wyatt, turn from his past, but unlike the latter, his sense of sin remains. His divine tribunal waiting "far away" (V., 345) and his soul still torn, all he is able to do is to persevere in his disunity and pass a wish, a prayer for closeness to God and unity on to his daughter (V., 314).⁵⁹³

⁵⁹² See White, *Metahistory*, 360.

⁵⁹³ What comes to mind here is Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, not the protagonist but the novel's narrator, the Catholic historian and self-declared humanist Serenus Zeitblom. The latter writes in isolation during and after the event. Amidst the "beleaguered Fortress Europe" (DF, 5), estranged from his nation's authorities, he dwells in a "certain void" (DF, 13), an "old man, bent, almost broken by the horrors of the time in which he wrote and by those that are the subject of what he has written" (DF, 528). He intends to send his notes, the "product of years thronged with both memories and current years" (DF, 528), to America, where they may be of use for future generations. His impulse may be didactic, but its product is not without gilding and altering, and partly aimed at writing off his own guilt; cf. Paul Eisenstein, "Leverkühn as Witness: The Holocaust in Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus*", *The German Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (1997): 325-346.

Chapter 6: Pynchon's *Faust*, Part Two - *Gravity's Rainbow*

[I]n the centre is the position of the *Homo Dei*, between recklessness and reason

–Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*⁵⁹⁴

Spanning from seventeenth century New England to Nazi Germany and, implicitly, America's military engagement in Vietnam, juxtaposing Puritan and neo-Romantic notions of destiny, mystical and neo-Freudian tropes of transcendence, technologies of social organisation and physical extinction, all of which inevitably point toward a final Zero, the synoptic vision of *Gravity's Rainbow* indeed suggests a Faustian continuity in about 400 years of Western history. Although Joel D. Black rightly observes that Pynchon “describes a Nature which has been ruthlessly violated, quantified, and technologically transformed by the irreversible, exhaustive processes of History”,⁵⁹⁵ one should be careful in capitalising history and thereby presenting it as a dehumanised and depoliticised process of decline, unless one wants to subscribe to the same principles Pynchon's paranoids and inhabitants of the hothouse thrive on. Just as Pynchon shows an ironic distance to the narrative of entropic decline in his early stories, rendering it an exercise in self-immobilisation,⁵⁹⁶ and just as he satirises Robert Graves's mythopoeic lament of disenchantment, it is safe to suggest that he shows an equal distance to the Spenglerian plot in *Gravity's Rainbow*. With the stance “[y]ou will want cause and effect” (GR, 663), he presents a vision of “pan-cultural destiny” so absurdly thorough that it is hard to take it at face value.⁵⁹⁷ Firmly entrenched in a framework inspired by Weber and Marcuse, however, the novel does

⁵⁹⁴ Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, trans. H.T. Lowe-Porter (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 496 (hereafter cited in text as MM).

⁵⁹⁵ Joel D. Black, “Probing a Post-Romantic Paleontology: Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*”, *boundary 2* 8, no. 2 (1980): 233.

⁵⁹⁶ Callisto, in the short story, “Entropy”, for instance, becomes gradually imprisoned by the lesson he has drawn from an encounter with the second law of thermodynamics: “you can't win” (*Slow Learner*, 87). Callisto succumbs to his all too “adequate metaphor” (*ibid.*, 88) for tendencies he sees in American society. Although he is aware of the dangers involved in his “reductive fallacy” and hopes “not to drift into the graceful decadence of an enervated fatalism” (*ibid.*, 87), he dwells “helpless[ly] in the past” (*ibid.*, 97), waiting in his hothouse for “darkness and the final absence of all motion” (*ibid.*, 98). If Pynchon, as Cooper argues, “has shifted the focus [...] away from the individual's search for authenticity or quest for existential self-creation and has fixed it on the larger social [...] forces within whose confines the reduced characters try to move” (*Signs and Symptoms*, 182), such confinements are often self-made. The problem in such cases, as Thomas Moore observes, lies not in the system itself; the systematizing impulse is felt to betray an ideal of “freedom”, yet “[s]ystems express and define us; any idea of cognitive or mythic life without them is a contradiction in terms” (*The Style of Connectedness*, 157). As argued in the previous chapter, problems emerge only when epistemological systems are taken as absolutes, projected onto the world, and supplemented with a teleological drive.

⁵⁹⁷ Dalsgaard, “The Linking Feature”, 107.

not naively deny the economic superstructure that determines the ever-increasing growth of industrial and military technologies. Even though the concoctions of some of his characters about ‘invisible’ markets existing in a secret conspiracy with a nefarious shadow regime of ‘Them’ tend to mystify such relations, their paranoid air castles are certainly caricatures of real cartels and economies.⁵⁹⁸ Behind Pynchon’s self-conscious jocularity, then, stands the project of documenting the underbelly of modern history, in which technological, totalitarian, and capitalist rationales of repression and exploitation go hand in hand for the sake of domination and profit—if not in terms of causality or continuity, then at least as emergent epiphenomena that mutually comment on each other. As Cowart argues in his work on the ‘Dark Passages of History’ in Pynchon, German (read Faustian) culture “remains a paradigm” and “part of a much broader spectrum” for the author.⁵⁹⁹

Thus, rather than implying a teleology in my presentation, I will first present the Faustian themes Pynchon depicts in the German setting of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, focusing on the industrial and political processes that culminate in Major Weissmann’s engineering project, and then I will present their ‘correlatives’ in the American ‘setting’ as represented in Slothrop’s memories. In doing so, I demonstrate where Pynchon draws and deviates from Goethe and Spengler, using both narratives

⁵⁹⁸ Bell argues in this context that Pynchon makes the distinction between history and fiction “impossible to draw” (*Literature, Modernism, Myth*, 200); cf. Amy H. Elias, “History”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Pynchon, The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon*, ed. Inger H. Dalsgaard, Luc Herman, and Brian McHale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 133. In some of the paranoid moments of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, for instance, the “true war” appears as “a celebration” of “[o]rganic markets” (GR, 105) that are fully remote from human agency or even Adam Smith’s principle of the Invisible Hand: [a] market needed no longer be run by the Invisible Hand, but now could *create itself*” (GR, 30). Oberst Enzian similarly muses that the “War was never political at all, the politics was all theatre, all just to keep the people distracted... secretly, it was being dictated instead by the needs of technology... by a conspiracy between human beings and techniques [...] The real crises were crises of allocation and priority, not among firms—it was only staged to look that way—but among the different Technologies, Plastics, Electronics, Aircraft, and their needs which are understood only by the ruling elite...” (GR, 521). However, despite the seductiveness of such visions and their tendency to deflect questions of human responsibility, the historical facts in the novel readily revise such assumptions (see Moore, *The Style of Connectedness*, 137-38). Similar holds true for the seemingly omnipresent “Them”, which are invariably invoked when characters conceptualise their feelings of powerlessness against a economic and political elite analogously to theological dichotomies of elect and preterite. Moore, for instance, argues that these characters project the “paranoid symbolizations of their particular [...] states of mind” onto the white screen ‘Them’, with the “forces of secular power, of business cartels and of government” providing the “first and easiest of They-metaphors” (*ibid.*, 70; cf. R.D. Laing’s *The Politics of Experience*, 1967). Drawing from Martin Heidegger’s use of “They” in *Being and Time*, Philip Kuberski similarly argues that “They” refers to the “ideological ‘origin’ invoked by Us”. Philip Kuberski, “Gravity’s Angel: The Ideology of Pynchon’s Fiction”, *boundary 2* 15, no. 1-2 (1986-87): 146.

⁵⁹⁹ Cowart, *Thomas Pynchon and the Dark Passages of History*, 60, 59.

to comment on his characters while simultaneously subverting and thereby re-politicising the myth of Faust.

1. *Modus Vivendi*

In the first episode of *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon suggests that the world is a closed system: there is no “disentanglement from”, but only “a progressive knotting *into*” (GR, 3). Immediately after this nightmarish vision of Captain Pirate Prentice, dreamt in a London ghosted by V-2s, Pynchon describes a *modus vivendi* within this system, without fear of extermination and the consequent need for escape. The latter is epitomised in Prentice’s greenhouse on the top of a Special Operations habitation. In the rooftop garden of the requisitioned hotel, tree leaves, manure, and human detritus amalgamate into “unbelievable black topsoil” in which bananas grow (GR, 5), and these bananas, a counter-image to the V-2 rockets, are equally ‘magical’:

Pirate has become famous for his Banana Breakfast. Messmates throng here from all over England, even some who are allergic or outright hostile to bananas, just to watch—for the politics of bacteria, the soil’s stringing of rings and chains in nets only God can tell the meshes of, have seen the fruit thrive often to lengths of a foot and a half, yes amazing but true. (GR, 5-6)⁶⁰⁰

Such stringing, is nothing but “life’s whole life” (F, 457), in Goethe’s words, or, in the alchemical terms of Mann’s *Magic Mountain*, warmth

generated by a form-preserving instability, a fever of matter, which accompanied the whole process of ceaseless decay and repair [...] that were too impossibly complicated, too impossibly ingenious in structure [...] the existence of the actually impossible-to-exist [...] (MM, 275)

What Pynchon describes here is the working of nature as a living, conscious *alma mater*, the all-nourishing “mindbody” (GR, 590), and it is the “assertion-through-structure” (GR, 6) of living genetic chains, as represented in this case by bananas, by which “Death is [...] clearly told to fuck off” (GR, 10). How nature does this is of no

⁶⁰⁰ See *Faust*: “We snatch in vain at Nature’s veil,/ She is mysterious in broad daylight,/ No screws or levers can compel her to reveal/ The secrets she has hidden from our sight” (F, 672-76).

interest for Prentice and his messmates, as long as it possesses such power. For Prentice, thus, the smell of bananas even becomes an apotropaic spell against sudden peril, and although there is no causal relationship between such ‘magic’ and the “premature Brennschuss” (GR, 8) of an approaching V-2 rocket, the fiction enables him to persevere.

Yet such bucolic life with the positive forces of nature constitutes an exception, a counter-entropic “island” in a sea of decline, in Norbert Wiener’s terms.⁶⁰¹ The other, dominant mode of existence is introduced in an almost casually deceptive manner. The first part of *Gravity’s Rainbow* opens with the often-cited epigraph:

Nature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation. Everything science has taught me, and continues to teach me, strengthens my belief in the continuity of our spiritual existence after death.

—WERNHER VON BRAUN (GR, 1)

These words are taken from von Braun’s *apologia pro scientia sua* “Why I Believe in Immortality”. The short piece has itself an epigraph that ventriloquizes a creed by Benjamin Franklin, expressed in a letter to Ezra Stiles on March 9, 1790: “I believe ... that the soul of Man is immortal and will be treated with justice in another life respecting its conduct in this”.⁶⁰² Expressing his belief in the continuity of our spiritual existence after death, von Braun forfeits allegations of immorality in a world that has allegedly replaced religion with science. Yet the fact that he tacitly omits any mentioning of the ethical implications of the latter science is revealing, for the notions of ‘afterlife’ and ‘Last Judgment’ become obsolete in his immanentist vision. If Dalsgaard, although in a different context, points to the loss of “naïveté which cannot fail to inform knowledgeable readings of Braun today”,⁶⁰³ such a reading cannot ignore the discrepancy between von Braun’s rhetoric of physics as metaphysics and his actual work. Establishing a dialogue between the first and last epigraph of the novel, Joel D. Black argues that von Braun’s assertion that nature does not know extinction “is totally incomprehensible to the technocratic manipulator Richard M.

⁶⁰¹ Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings*, 40; cf. Moore, *The Style of Connectedness*, 167.

⁶⁰² Cited in Wernher von Braun, “Why I Believe in Immortality”, in *The Third Book of Words to Live By*, ed. W. Nichols (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1962), 119.

⁶⁰³ Inger Dalsgaard, “*Gravity’s Rainbow*: ‘An Historical Novel of the Whole New Sort’”, in *Blissful Bewilderment: Studies in the Fiction of Thomas Pynchon*, ed. Anne Mangenand Rolf Gaasland (Oslo, Novus Press, 2002), 92.

Nixon who, in the epigraph to the last part of the book, can only respond, ‘What?’”⁶⁰⁴ Against the background of von Braun’s factual contribution to the German and American military-industrial complexes, however, such a reading tends to overemphasise the engineer’s mystifications. Von Braun “knew that his established reputation as a technological genius [...] would create interest around his person”,⁶⁰⁵ and one is tempted to add that with about 1000 V-2 rockets fired to London during the final years of the Second World War, this reputation could not have been more dubious. Indeed, despite his later PR alchemy, partly in cooperation with Walt Disney, the “fictional product” von Braun, “created by himself, the US Army, NASA and his autobiographers [sic] in the decades following World War Two”,⁶⁰⁶ could not gloss over his former life as a producer of retaliatory weapons and SS Sturmbandführer, a fact that was given vocal expression in literary fiction, most notably in Mailer’s aforementioned *A Fire on the Moon*. Musing whether von Braun, whose name alone he considers “attractive and repellent at once”, is of the Lord’s or of the devil’s party, he concludes that the charismatic engineer falls into the latter category—the “Apollo-Saturn was still a child of the Devil”.⁶⁰⁷ Yet if such moralizing mystifications were only gradually replaced by more informed works, such as Michael J. Neufeld’s, the latter still concludes that the engineer was indeed a “twentieth-century Faust”,⁶⁰⁸ not least because the V2 became a “delivery system for global catastrophe” when “combined with America’s own contribution, the atomic bomb”, as Hite points out.⁶⁰⁹ Thus, it is hardly a coincidence that when von Braun and his avatars have just left the Zone, Pynchon states:⁶¹⁰

We must also never forget famous Missouri Mason Harry Truman: sitting by virtue of death in office, this very August 1945, with his control-finger poised right on Miss Enola Gay’s atomic clit, making ready to tickle 100,000 little yellow folks into what will come down as a fine vapor-deposit of fat-cracklings wrinkled into the fused rubble of their city on the Inland Sea [...] (GR, 588)

⁶⁰⁴ Black, “Probing a Post-Romantic Paleontology”, 244.

⁶⁰⁵ Dalsgaard, “*Gravity’s Rainbow*”, 92.

⁶⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁶⁰⁷ Mailer, *A Fire on the Moon*, 54, 61, 84.

⁶⁰⁸ Michael J. Neufeld, *Von Braun: Dreamer of Space, Engineer of War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 477.

⁶⁰⁹ Hite, *Ideas of Order*, 110.

⁶¹⁰ Von Braun never appears but is mentioned several times in the novel (GR, 273, 361, 402, 588).

It is this “vapor-deposit”—the annulment of metaphysics that had begun in Auschwitz—that stands between von Braun’s “[n]ature does not know extinction” and the American technocratic order of the 1970s. Von Braun’s dream, eagerly received in America, demonstrates the destructive potentialities of scientific enlightenment. Norbert Wiener, writing in the beginning of the Cold War, comments back on such alchemy in an account of the entropic effects of inanimate weapons that do not release any material or information that can be reintegrated into a wider life-system. As Wiener writes, in a manner invoking Mephistopheles and Freud’s death-drive:

The effect of these weapons must be to increase the entropy of this planet, until all distinctions of hot and cold, good and bad, man and matter have vanished in the formation of the white furnace of a new star.⁶¹¹

It is this vision of death that frames the narrative of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, for if Pirate Prentice sees a “new star, nothing less noticeable” (GR, 6) at the novel’s beginning, it is a star that hangs beneath the sky-risen feet of one of innumerable victims at its ending (GR, 760). The novel’s last rocket descends onto the New World. Frozen in an infinitesimally small distance over the Los Angeles “Orpheus Theater”, it “constitutes a permanent threat to America,” as Kolbulszewska holds.⁶¹² It does so, however, less as a signifier of National Socialist military aggression than of an assembly of processes also constituent of an ascending American technocracy of the sixties “grasping for empire”.⁶¹³ If nature does not know extinction, neither does mankind’s aspirations to violate her cycles of transformation by repressing, replacing, and annihilating all that is natural for the sake of its own aggrandisement, in short, the Faustian project of grasping life’s forces at the cost of life itself.

⁶¹¹ Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings*, 129.

⁶¹² Kolbulszewska, *The Poetics of Chronotope*, 141.

⁶¹³ See Lance Schachterle, “Pynchon and the Civil Wars of Technology”, in *Literature and Technology*, ed. Mark L. Greenberg and Lance Schachterle (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 1992), 263.

2. Suicidal Systems

What men want to learn from nature is how to use it in order wholly to dominate it and other men. That is the only aim.
—Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*⁶¹⁴

Toward the end of *Gravity's Rainbow* the witch Geli Tripping announces the most pessimistic assessment of human life on earth:

This is the world just before men. Too violently itched alive in constant flow ever to be seen by men directly. They are meant only to look at it dead, in still strata, transputrefied to oil or coal. Alive, it was a threat: it was [...] an overspeaking of life so clangorous and mad [...] that some spoiler *had* to be brought in before it blew the Creation apart. So we, the crippled keepers, were sent out to multiply, to have dominion. God's spoilers. Us. Counter-revolutionaries. *It is our mission to promote death.* [...] It was something we had to work on, historically and personally. (GR, 720)

This 'mission', in its systemic industrial manifestation, is first of all to unlock nature's secrets and systematically exploit them for the sake of human emancipation from nature. As Marcuse writes: "History is the negation of Nature. What is only natural is overcome and recreated by the power of Reason" (ODM, 248). The history of industrial capitalism emergent in *Gravity's Rainbow* depicts a systematic recreation of the natural in the service of instrumental reason, which, in Horkheimer and Adorno's terms, turns nature into "mere objectivity" (DE, 9). The mystery of *natura naturans* itself is thereby sacrificed. Pynchon's narrator describes this transformation when the financial magnate and honorary freemason Lyle Bland beholds "Earth's mindbody" in a mystical voyage to the "holy center" (GR, 590). There, "the wastes of dead species" are "gathered, packed, transmuted, realigned, and rewoven" to be "taken up again [...] boiled off, teased apart, explicated to every last permutation of useful magic" and finally recombined "into new synthetics" (*ibid.*). On an industrial scale, such technological rationale is inaugurated in Friedrich August Kerkulé von Stradonitz's "great Dream that revolutionized chemistry and made the industrial cartel IG Farben, one of the novel's major promoters of death, "possible" (GR, 410). Kerkulé, "looking for [...] hidden shapes",

⁶¹⁴ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 4.

dreams the Great Serpent holding its own tail in its mouth, the dreaming serpent which surrounds the World. But the meanness, the cynicism with which this dream is to be used. (GR, 412)

In its secularised version, such alchemy betrays the same ludicrousness as Gaddis's modern makers of gold. Broken loose from the religious framework, in which the artifex works within a God-given order, the technological aspect inherent in transmutation now fully operates in the spirit of technocracy.⁶¹⁵ The assembly of "new molecules" from the "debris of the given",⁶¹⁶ the narrator explains, tongue in cheek,

brought us directly to nylon, which not only is a delight to the fetishist and a convenience to the armed insurgent, but was also, at the time well within the System, an announcement of Plasticity's central canon: that chemists were no longer to be at the mercy of Nature. (GR, 249)

Recombined, structured, and rationalised,⁶¹⁷ the polymerisation of hydrocarbon bonds describes first of all a shift from working what is "found in Nature, unquestioning" (GR, 413) to a technological mode of production. Instead of bringing forth what emerges, as in Prentice's greenhouse, man orders by analysing, separating, and reorganizing the given according to a technological schema merely directed by utility. In such a system, as Friedrich Kittler argues, metaphysics "comes to an end and is perfected" as what Heidegger terms enframing.⁶¹⁸ Such disenchanting alchemy is not aimed at the perfection of potentials in nature in order to redeem them, but their potentiality is turned toward human ends, or "convenience", as it were, that is, to regulate and secure.⁶¹⁹ Synthesised "to order, bent [...], clasped, and strung" (GR,

⁶¹⁵ See Baudrillard, "Technology and technocracy are already fully operative in the notion of an ideal counterfeit of the world, expressed in the invention of a universal substance and a universal combinatory of substances" (*Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 52).

⁶¹⁶ Dalsgaard, "The Linking Feature", 110.

⁶¹⁷ It is the "bureaucrats" of the Other Side that let the dream come through to Kerkulé (cf. GR, 410).

⁶¹⁸ Friedrich Kittler, "Electro Mysticism", trans. Kathrin G and Martin Howse, *Pynchon Notes* 54-55 (2008): 120. See also Heidegger, who writes: "The revealing that rules throughout modern technology has the character of a setting-upon, in the sense of a challenging-forth. Such challenging happens in that the energy concealed in nature is unlocked, what is unlocked is transformed, what is transformed is stored up, what is stored up is, in turn, distributed, and what is distributed is switched about ever anew. [...] Regulating and securing [...] become the chief characteristics of the revealing that challenges". Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology", in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper, 1977), 297-98.

⁶¹⁹ See Heidegger: "Regulating and securing [...] become the chief characteristics of the revealing that challenges" ("The Question Concerning Technology", 298); see also Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 9.

250), synthetics become a universal substance, a technocratic *lapis philosophorum*, with which to supersede nature's limitations, an entirely artificial world obeying human command.⁶²⁰ While plasticity's uses for fetishism and insurgence remain distinctly marginal, its central function, liberation from nature, is rendered by Pynchon a paradigmatic example of how emancipation by means of reason easily evolves into a destructive endeavour. More apodictically, in the words of Horkheimer and Adorno: domination invariably leads to alienation from what is dominated.⁶²¹ If in the IG's case such alienation is desired, as an establishment of power hierarchies, it also directly nourishes a fatal misconception. All attempts to dominate nature, as Heidegger has shown, "arise from the illusion that we are separate from the natural order of things".⁶²² Embedded in a multinational cartel under the maxim of profit, however, the petrochemical system exceeds further and further the necessary alienation from nature that enables free human self-realization (cf. EC, 227). In her analysis of relations between Marcuse and Pynchon, Hite writes:

The organization of Western societies under patriarchal capitalism, the monogamous family, and the work ethic is for Marcuse always defined by the requirement of transcendence—that is, of exceeding the present moment and thrusting into the future in order to dominate and control further. And for Marcuse the most poignant symbol of such transcendence is the ascending curve, a visual representation of endless progress.⁶²³

Within the framework of advanced industrial societies, then, man's dominion depends on constant increase and augmentation, congruent with the principles of economic gain with which the IG operate. Since this 'progress' is based on the exploitation of natural resources, however, the curve of progress is bound to bend. The IG does not merely deaden what it analyses but, dependent on natural resources, it becomes an "enterprise driven to systemic destruction by the very instruments with which it secured its dominion".⁶²⁴ Pynchon's narrator remarks:

⁶²⁰ If the process of polymer production betrays totalitarian violence, plasticity's "virtuous triad of Strength, Stability and Whiteness" (GR, 250) is equally 'mistaken' as a Nazi slogan.

⁶²¹ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 9.

⁶²² Zimmermann, *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity*, 220.

⁶²³ Molly Hite, "'Fun Actually Was Becoming Quite Subversive': Herbert Marcuse, the Yippies, and the Value System of Gravity's Rainbow", *Contemporary Literature* 51, no. 4 (2010): 684.

⁶²⁴ Dalsgaard, "The Linking Feature", 97, cf. 112.

The Serpent that announces, “The World is a closed thing, cyclical, resonant, eternally-returning,” is to be delivered into a system whose only aim is to *violate* the circle. 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 may or may not understand that that it’s only buying time. And that time is an artificial resource to begin with, of no value to anyone or anything but the System, which sooner or later must crash to its death, when its addiction to energy has become more than the rest of the World can supply, dragging with it innocent souls all along the chain of life. Living inside the System is like riding across the country in a bus driven by a maniac bent on suicide... (GR, 412)

The Spenglerian tenor of this section is unusually direct. Spengler writes:

The Western industry has diverted the ancient traditions of the other Cultures. The streams of economic life move towards the seats of King Coal and the great regions of raw material. Nature becomes exhausted, the globe sacrificed to Faustian thinking in energies. (DW, 2:505)

Instrumental ‘rationality’ thereby betrays a Faustian character, by which short-term gratification is bought at the cost of existence on the long-term. The anthropocentric shift from alchemy to chemistry endows humans with power, seemingly liberating them from contingency and limitation but eventually delivering them from the mercy of nature to a full negation of life. The second delusion of the System is that it thereby disregards basic natural limitations that prevent a salvation of sorts in the first place. Therefore, if the cartel, as Eddins argues, embodies “absolute and man imposed control, [...] an entirely artificial System that will make nature obsolete”,⁶²⁵ it all too readily forgets that its attempted liberation is bound to physical realities. Ironically, as Tabbi shows, it is again the Other Side that brings the laws of nature “more forcefully to bear against any dream of transcendence or unconstrained progress through technology”.⁶²⁶ In the well-known séance scene, the spirit of Walter Rathenau, “prophet and architect of the cartelized state” (GR, 164), implies, as Tabbi argues, that “there is an order in nature that determines the possible uses we can make of it, and beyond which no social, political or technological order can go”.⁶²⁷ It is “the technology of these matters”, the “hearts of certain molecules [...] which dictate

⁶²⁵ Eddins, *The Gnostic Pynchon*, 111.

⁶²⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶²⁷ Tabbi, *Postmodern Sublime*, 83.

temperatures, pressures rates of flow, costs” (GR, 167). The constant re-organisation of molecules thereby remains in the service of

Death converted into more death. Perfecting its reign, just as the buried coal grows denser, and overlaid with more strata—epoch on top of epoch. City on top of ruined city. This is the sign of Death the impersonator. (*Ibid.*)

Thus, just as the war merely shows a “cruel, accidental resemblance to life” (GR, 131), the “growing, organic Kartell” of the IG Farben, as the spirit of Rathenau points out, is not life but a “very clever robot. The more dynamic it seems to you, the more deep and dead, in reality, it grows” (GR, 167). Any real transmutation is impossible:

The real moment is not from death to any rebirth. It is from death to death-transfigured. The best you can do is to polymerize a few dead molecules. But polymerizing is not resurrection. (GR, 166)

Plasticity, and its entire production system, as Pynchon’s allusions to Brown elsewhere indicate, represents nothing but an Apollonian dream. The latter, a “fiction empowered wholly by technical simulations”, is “ultimately incapable of reflecting any reality outside itself”, as Joseph Tabbi in his discussion of technologies in Pynchon points out.⁶²⁸ Reason, just like Goethe’s Faust, tries to abandon Care and as a consequence is struck blind. And like Spengler’s Faustian man it embarks on a flight in which the course of self-realisation becomes identical with annihilation.

3. Immortality

A technological rationale is the rationale of domination itself.
—Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*⁶²⁹

The question concerning technology, to use Heidegger’s phrase, is symptomatic in this respect, especially in terms of the ‘protagonist’ of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the V-2 rocket. At the centre of the suicidal “System”, feeding on everything natural, from steel and hydrocarbon to potatoes (for fuel: GR, 550) and permanganate (GR, 375), it is a metonymic expression of the project of progress for the sake of domination and

⁶²⁸ Tabbi, *Postmodern Sublime*, 85.

⁶²⁹ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 121.

financial gain that is bound to exhaust its sources and collapse into itself.⁶³⁰ As Hite observes in her Marcusean reading, it is the uncontrolled fall of the rocket that is “the major image in *Gravity’s Rainbow* of the tendency of the performance principle”, in Marcuse’s terms the mode of organisation in capitalist societies that emphasises productivity, “to fall into service of the death drive”.⁶³¹ Finally, even if Pynchon’s Rocket-Manichaeans “see two Rockets, good and evil [...] a good Rocket to take us to the stars, an evil Rocket for the World’s suicide” (GR, 727), that is, even if he points to a “utopian potential” of technology that cannot be eradicated by its dystopian uses, as Sascha Pöhlmann argues,⁶³² the cynicism with which his characters abuse the former is immense.

As discussed in the previous chapter, V. holds no fire in suggesting connections between the German and the American industrial complex, in which the always-already alienated readily do away with their ‘souls’. In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the Faustian grasping for immortality and strength similarly progresses from the aegis of Fascism to that of post-war technocracy. Symptomatic in this respect is the chemist Laszlo Jamf, inventor of the most fiendish and ubiquitous ‘aberration’ of plasticity, the polymer Imipolex G.⁶³³ After a career in organic chemistry, Jamf, ‘infected’ by the *Zeitgeist* of “National Socialist chemistry” (GR, 578), develops a hatred for the “covalent bond”, which he wants to have improved, if not “transcended” (GR, 577),

⁶³⁰ Despite its deification, demonization and mystification, however, the rocket, as all technology in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, as Tabbi argues, is first and foremost “‘raw hardware,’ a concrete assemblage of parts and functions whose details are too profuse, and too firmly rooted in technological fact, to have been introduced solely as a contribution to a cultural mystique or mythological cosmos” (*Postmodern Sublime*, 80). Technology in Pynchon, as Cooper argues, Pynchon is not autotelic (Cooper, *Signs and Symptoms*, 61). It is social before being technical, or, in the words of one of his characters: “Technology only responds [...] Go ahead, capitalize the T on technology, deify it if it’ll make you feel less responsible” (GR, 521). Thus, even if this screaming across the sky makes its first appearance in the novel as a Luciferian “new star” rising in the east (GR, 6), *Gravity’s Rainbow* complicates any notions of autonomous, death-bound, or ‘evil’ technology. The latter comes most explicitly to the fore in a dialogue between Katje and Enzian. When the latter says: “I would show you the Raketen-Stadt. [...] We would gaze down on staff-rooms, communications centers, laboratories, clinics. I would say-”(GR, 660), Katje is prompted to think of Satan’s famous offer: “All this I will give you, if you will but—“ (cf. Luke 4:6-7). Yet Enzian responds: “*Negative*. Wrong story” (GR, 660).

⁶³¹ Hite, “Fun Actually”, 684.

⁶³² Sascha Pöhlmann, *Pynchon’s Postnational Imagination* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 2010), 281. Pöhlmann convincingly revises older interpretations of the rocket as a manifestation of a purely negative eschatology, for instance Hite’s, that sees in the rocket’s parabolic path a revised version of the Christian myth “with the possibility of salvation removed” (*Ideas of Order*, 11-12, cf. 97).

⁶³³ Imipolex is an “erectile” polymer that can assume almost any attribute under suitable stimuli, “from limp rubbery amorphous to amazing perfect tessellation, hardness, brilliant transparency” (GR, 699), and also pass on these attributes to humans, it is a most ferocious manifestation of domination by means of technology that ranks only second to Blicero’s rocket. Constantly identified as a medium of phallic aggression, be it in Slothrop’s conditioning or Greta Erdmann’s Imipolex suit, or Gottfried’s shroud, the “G” in Imipolex G alludes to Brown’s concept of genital organization (see my chapter 7).

as some of his students believe. In the manner of the Bad Priest in *V.*, Jamf wants to “move beyond life, toward the inorganic. Here’s no frailty, no mortality—here is Strength, and the Timeless” (GR, 580). Such a move, however, is invariably concomitant with dehumanisation. Feeling humiliated by the fact that something “so *soft*” as carbon “should lie at the core of life, his *life*”, he directs his aim towards the “mineral stubbornness” of the ionic bond (*ibid.*). For Jamf, the latter appeals to a wish for clarity and structure, but it also represents a scenario for an imperial will to possession and power, where “electrons are not shared, but *captured*” (*ibid.*). In his Munich lectures during the Weimar era, Jamf tells his class:

“Whatever lip-service we may pay to Reason, [...] to moderation and compromise, nevertheless there remains the lion. A lion in each one of you. He is either tamed—by too much mathematics, by details of design, by corporate procedures—or he stays wild.” (GR, 577)

Such striving to become an *Übermensch* rather than finding a way of life within human limitations is, albeit tongue in cheek, identified as a “SI-N” (GR, 580), as Pynchon expresses it in the theologico-chemical formula of Jamf’s propagated inorganic Silicon-Nitrogen bond. Unlike the Bad Priest, however, Jamf is not dismantled but his propagations will inspire the world-view of a whole generation of chemists and engineers. For the latter, an amalgamation of scientism and *volk*-ideology becomes the credo for a suicidal violation of the Ouroboric cycle. Although Pynchon’s imagery is hyperbolic, it perfectly reflects the “twentieth-century German conditions issued from the interplay between *Volk*-ish charisma and technologised rationality” that led to the barbarism of the Third Reich, as Moore holds.⁶³⁴ While in the *Magic Mountain* Schubert’s “Linden Tree” epitomises a sentiment “worth dying for” (MM, 653), followed by Hans Castorp and his fellows, in *Gravity’s Rainbow* a Rilkean “once, only once” is twisted into a fatalist “No return, no salvation” (GR, 413).⁶³⁵ And while the younger generation falls prey to a “perverted science, laden with death” (MM, 715), Jamf silently returns to organic chemistry in his new adopted country America.

⁶³⁴ Moore, *The Style of Connectedness*, 207.

⁶³⁵ Goldman (*Politics, Death, and the Devil*, 66-67, 226) excellently discusses what Weber termed ‘calling’ in the context of WWI. Conceiving of their participation in battle as a calling gave the combatants an empowering sense of struggling for a noble cause. McCann notes that *Gravity’s Rainbow* addresses similar tendencies Slothrop’s irrational mission (“‘Down to the people’,” 258).

3.1. Weissmann/Blicero – Faust as Engineer

In a repressive civilization, death itself becomes an instrument of repression. Whether death is feared as constant threat, or glorified as supreme sacrifice, or accepted as fate, the education for consent to death introduces an element of surrender into life from the beginning—surrender and submission.
—Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*⁶³⁶

They are only pretending Death is Their servant—faith in Death as the master of us all—is to ask for an order of courage that I know is beyond my own humanity, though I cannot speak for others.
—Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*⁶³⁷

The most spectacular misappropriation of both myth and soteriology in *Gravity's Rainbow* can be found in the building project of the rocket engineer and SS Officer Weissmann (aka Dominus Blicero). Hardly any character in Pynchon's work is more valorised, and hardly any is more frequently termed Faustian or Mephistophelian. If Wernher von Braun is the modern historical Faust working in the dearest interest of death while dreaming of flying to the moon, this caricature represents the bloody underbelly of such a schizophrenic existence. Dwight Eddins, for instance, describes him as “a figure of such portentous evil and insidious capability that his creator Pynchon occasionally seems, like Milton, to be of the Devil's party without knowing it”.⁶³⁸ Such readings are legitimate to some extent, for Weissmann shows, like Mann's Germans, a combination of technological skill and a “psychological state threatened by the poison of loneliness, [...] neurotic involution, unspoken Satanism” (DF, 326). Indeed, a homosexual, paranoid, sadistic Nazi, who fires his young lover deathwards, Weissmann/Blicero is a Blonde Beast hyperbolic to the point of caricature. An all too ready invocation of the category of metaphysical evil, however, tends to naturalise the wider criticism at work in *Gravity's Rainbow* that not only includes the economic and political superstructure in which Weissmann operates but also those specialists and moderate men such as Kurt Mondaugen and Franz Pökler, who help realising his dream and eventually carry it “into the corporate culture of post-war America”.⁶³⁹

Weissmann hears his ‘calling’ in the German southwest African protectorate. In “love with empire, poetry, his own arrogance” (GR, 660), he arrives in the German southwest African protectorate carrying with him a copy of the *Duino Elegies*, “just

⁶³⁶ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 236.

⁶³⁷ Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, 540.

⁶³⁸ Eddins, *The Gnostic Pynchon*, 142.

⁶³⁹ Tabbi, *Postmodern Sublime*, 97.

off the presses, [...] a gift from Mother at the boat” (GR, 99). “Self-enchanted by [...] bookish symmetries” (GR, 101), this “scholarly white” (GR, 99) wanders there in a universe of poetry and art myth, “all alone, terminally alone, up and up into the mountains of Primal Pain, with the wildly alien constellations overhead” (GR, 98), while his perusal of Rilke feeds into his romantic yearning for transcendence and megalomaniac self-apotheosis. Finding his “night-flower”, whom he names after a word of Rilkean purity “Enzian”, he has an ‘initiatory’ experience:

The boy wants to fuck, but he is using the Herero name of God. An extraordinary chill comes over the white man. [...] Tonight he feels the potency of every word: words are only an eye-twitch away from the things they stand for. The peril of bugging the boy under the resonance of the sacred Name fills him insanely with lust, lust in the face—the mask— of instant talion from outside the fire . . . but to the boy Ndjambi Karunga is what happens when they couple, that’s all: God is creator and destroyer, sun and darkness, all sets of opposites brought together, including black and white, male and female [...] (GR, 100)

What Weissmann has in mind here is the position of *homo dei*, in whose mastery all opposites are reconciled. While Pynchon does not fail to refer to a factual relation between creation and destruction in the southwest protectorate, where a railroad is being built through the desert at the same time as sixty per cent of the Herero people are exterminated, Weissmann’s narcissism and his indefinite yearning for guilt appear entirely dissociated from reality (cf. GR, 323). However, he soon will have lost “all his innocence on this question” (GR, 98).

During the eternal Fasching at Foppl’s besieged villa, some pages before he gives Mondaugen the fateful message that there is nothing beyond the given, a cross-dressed Weissmann enters the electrical engineer’s room, his eyelashes, larded with mascara. The latter has “left dark parallel streaks” on his glasses “so that each eye looked from its own prison window” (V., 261). In this image he resembles Goethe’s Faust, who, in the second study scene with Mephisto, does present himself as a pitiable victim of the *conditio humana*: “The earth’s a prison—one can’t get away/ From it, whatever clothes one wears” (F, 1544-5). Like Faust, Weissmann will explore the very edges of the world (GR, 722) and his own self, attempting to transcend them, seeking to transform the external world in order to transform himself and thereby become godlike. And like Faust’s vision of a realm of unrestrained

human activity, his will be based on despotic rule and the sacrifice of human “raw material” (V., 242).

Embracing the Reich’s Flame (GR, 98), Weissmann comes to work with the dominant political and economic forces of his time. Concomitant with this wager is a re-interpretation of his initiatory experience with Enzian. Having learned that God is a *creator* and destroyer, the message he draws from this knowledge is that “every true god must be both organizer and destroyer” (GR, 99). If Weissmann is redefined by a word, a mechanism resembling the Puritan magic Pynchon describes in the episodes about Slothrop’s ancestors and Slothrop’s renaming as Rocketman, he twists this word into his own service while dismissing the category ‘creation’ entirely. Returned to Germany and working in the rocket development group, Weissmann is all “things to all men, a brand-new military type, part salesman, part scientist”, with the ability “to talk, with every appearance of sympathy and reason, to organized thinker and maniac idealist alike” (GR, 401). He is the “mind” that holds the machine “together”, to employ Spengler’s phrase (DW, 2:505), a manager, constructor and social engineer who knows how to arrange the raw materials of his project, forming alliances where necessary, dividing and ruling his staff of specialists. Hitherto a political enthusiast with an almost juvenily naïve fascination for Hitler, whose name he utters as if it were that “of an avant-garde play” (V., 241), he now uses the same appropriations of both *völkisch* mythology and technological rationality as the latter. His eyeglasses turned into “Wagnerian shields” (GR, 416), he incessantly works towards the assembly of his very own rocket, the 00000, driven by eschatological notions of *Erwartung* (GR, 101), *Schicksal* (GR, 416), and “Destiny” (GR, 98) and assessing everything he encounters in terms of its utility for this end. Mondaugen, already singled out as valuable in V., is made use of, and so is Pökler, who will work toward his ‘special destiny’ of designing a shroud which is to provide the interface between the rocket and human. The rationale behind Weissmann’s assembly of the 00000, as has been widely observed, is to transcend the natural world by means of technology. The rocket is for him, as Enzian explains, “an entire system *won*, away from the feminine darkness [...] of lovable, but scatterbrained Mother Nature” (GR, 324). Dreading nature and chance, technology (material and as technique) constitutes for him a means to retain control. Such “phallic” (cf. LD, 280) technology does thereby only partially mean “masculine victory over what he fears”, as Lance Schachterle

holds.⁶⁴⁰ The connotations of Imipolex G, Weissmann's nihilistic pleasure at the sight of misfiring rockets, in which the delight of destruction fuses with that of self-annihilation (GR, 96), and not least the manner in which he engineers machine and human alike bespeak nothing but domination. He gives testimony to the latter by assuming the SS-codename Dominus Blicero ('Lord Death'). Like Mephistopheles, in the Freudian interpretation, the latter appears as the "arch-enemy" of the "ever-stirring, wholesome energy" of life (F, 1379-80), a part of the darkness that prevailed before "light was born" (F, 1350-51). The "night", a state of primal, lifeless unity, is in Weissmann's "dearest interest" (GR, 666). And like Mephistopheles, his element is the flame:

I've buried millions—they're no sooner underground
Than new fresh blood will circulate again.
So it goes on; it drives me mad. The earth,
The air, the water, all give birth:
It germinates a thousandfold,
In dry or wet, in hot or cold!
Fire is still mine, that element alone—
Without it, I could call no place my own. (F, 1371-78)

Despite all references to Teutonic *Märchen* (GR, 98, 322) or Freudian categories, however, Blicero is first and foremost and example how the mythical fuses with the political in that Pynchon's mythography is clearly pre-empted by Nazi ideologists. When Blicero, dreading the contingency of war, for instance, is said to have "reverted to some ancestral version of himself, [...] into the Urstoff of the primitive German" (GR, 465), Pynchon describes a flight into pre-rational atavism which considerably fuelled Fascist appropriations of mythology.⁶⁴¹ However bestial and mythic Blicero may appear, Pynchon makes an important point in having the Major's former lover

⁶⁴⁰ Schachterle, "Pynchon and the Civil Wars of Technology", 262.

⁶⁴¹ After this experience Blicero is said to roam as a werewolf "with no humanity left in its eyes" in the "mythical regions" (GR, 486) of his Ur-Heimat, the white, bleached, and deadened, north. Blicero, significantly, 'turns' into this creature at a time during which SS guerrilla units going by the name *Werewolf* gained notoriety. In this transformation Pynchon may have his SS officer enact the observation of the narrator of Mann's *Doctor Faustus* about the "wretched grotesquery" of such naming: "And so, to the bitter end, the crudest fairy tale, that grim substratum of saga deep in the soul of the nation, is still invoked—not without finding a familiar echo" (DF, 505). Pynchon provides a comparably multivalent allusion in Katje's memory of her time with Blicero at the V-2 battery in Holland. When Blicero wonders whether Katje is a spy or member of the Dutch underground (GR, 96), behind his death-driven "night-breath" (GR, 94) lurks a reference to Hitler's "Nacht und Nebel" (Night and Fog) directive, the name of which is taken from a spell in Wagner's *Rheingold*.

Enzian suggest that he is “still human” (GR, 660). While Enzian’s proposition, uttered in a moment of loneliness, is a form of “ideological humanization” aimed at excusing the inexcusable, a manoeuvre that prefigures that pursued by the first-person-narrator of Jonathan Littell’s *The Kindly Ones* (2009), the reminder of his humanity deflates Weissmann’s self-mystifications.⁶⁴² Blicero remains a name chosen, chosen for its etymological value and mythological ‘authority’, and what it eventually signifies is how death and fear of death are pressed into the service of totalitarian rule. Such fear grants Weissmann a power that seems to verge on omnipotence during his time at the Mittelwerke, as Pynchon indicates in a brief post-war episode. When a group of former inmates cannot let go of the structure of the Dora camp, they invent a “hypothetical [...] chain of command” (GR, 665), a “phantom SS” (GR, 666), at the top of which they place Weissmann, whose presence during their imprisonment had grown so powerful that it crossed impenetrable walls:

What the 175s heard from their real SS guards there was enough to elevate Weissmann on the spot [...] When prisoners came in earshot, the guards stopped whispering. But their fear kept echoing: fear not of Weissmann personally, but of the time itself, a time so desperate that he could now move through the Mittelwerke as if he owned it, a time which was granting him a power different from that of Auschwitz or Buchenwald [...] (*ibid.*)

Eddins argues that he thereby attains “freedom from the limitations of physicality [...]. Gnosis brings ubiquity, a permeation of the structure of events by an evil presence that has successfully completed its Faustian compact”.⁶⁴³ What Eddins fails to acknowledge in his reading of this episode is that such ubiquity is by no means literal. What Weissmann has achieved is a successful self-elevation into the ranks of myth. More convincingly, Moore points in this context to paranoia of the megalomaniacal kind described by Freud in the Schreber case.⁶⁴⁴ Like Freud’s

⁶⁴² Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (London: Verso, 2009), 41, cf. 39-40. The assertion of Blicero’s humanity, this “dear albatross” (GR, 661), primarily seems to serve Enzian, estranged from his environment and having “lost everything else but this vantage”, to maintain the hope that there may be somewhere “a human heart left in which [he] exist[s]” (GR, 660).

⁶⁴³ Eddins, *The Gnostic Pynchon*, 145.

⁶⁴⁴ Moore, *The Style of Connectedness*, 75. Moore has listed some parallels between Blicero and the Schreber case. When Greta and Thanatz remember Blicero falling beyond the bounds of sanity, for instance, they state that “his eyes rolled clear up into his head” (GR, 465), which may point to a withdrawal of libido, according to Moore (*The Style of Connectedness*, 67). His cross-dressing games and his firing of Gottfried in drag are reminiscent of the conviction Schreber had in his paranoid phase that God would turn him into a woman and merge with him in a sexual act to create a race of

Schreber, and like Adorno's and Horkheimer's political paranoid, however, Weissmann "remains a mocking image of divine power" (DE, 191). Immersed in and drawing from an ultimately repressive superstructure, Weissmann's struggle for self-aggrandisement invariably perpetuates the former. Pynchon indicates such a mode in Blicero's sex games with Katje and Gottfried during the air raids on the V-2 rocket battery in Holland. Despite their sheer brutality, these are not simply expressions of sadism. Highly organised rituals, they are meant to establish "some formalized, rationalized version of what, outside, proceeds without form", preserving a routine and "shelter against what [...] none of them can bear—the War, the absolute rule of chance, their own pitiable contingency here" (GR, 96).⁶⁴⁵ Rendered along the narrative of Grimm's fairy-tale *Hänsel and Gretel*, his sadism is a technique channelling his irrational urges into a formalised system; it is sublimation, his very "own 'Hexeszüchtigung'" (GR, 95). The most terrifying aspect of these rituals is, however, that Blicero's sublimating move into the fiction of the "Oven's warmth, darkness, steel shelter" (GR, 98) mirrors the politics of organised destruction of the systems in which he operates, the petro-chemical industry and the Reich.⁶⁴⁶ Eventually, Blicero's games, like the entropic politics of Nazism, this "paradox of this [...] Little State, whose base is the same Oven which must destroy it" (GR, 99), can thereby by no means be a "way out" but merely a "foreplay" (GR, 98) of his Firing of Gottfried, the "ultimate expression, [...] terminus, and

superbeings, and his dream of transcendence may represent the "final building of sexual cathexis, through Gottfried and the V2, with death" (*ibid.*). Such analogies, however, are soon exhausted.

⁶⁴⁵ See Tabbi, *Postmodern Sublime*, 96.

⁶⁴⁶ Weissmann's discontent with the given appears to a certain extent as a test case in metapsychological eschatology, be it in direct allusions to Bown's *Life Against Death* and *Love's Body* or, less explicitly, Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*. While Blicero appears as a representative of Thanatos, as Hite observes, the "sensuously imaginative decadent" the young Weissmann is one of the characters acting "most directly on desire—a proponent of the pleasure principle who makes Eros inseparable from the death drive" ("Fun Actually", 689). Weissmann's sadism and the mythological identifications of the rocket with Eros (Phanes) substantiate his embodiment of the inseparable duality of the two drives (cf. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 56). Weissmann's construction work, on the other hand, as references to Brown suggest, is that of sublimation, the flight from life that perpetuates death (*ibid.*, 71). While for Freud sublimation could be a "way out", a stable, controlled satisfaction of primal drives, by which the claims of the ego can be met without repression (see LD, 139), Brown decidedly argued against such a modus. For him, sublimation "perpetuates the negative, narcissistic, and regressive solution of the infantile ego to the problem of disposing of life and death" (LD, 168); as a "search for lost life" it also "presupposes and perpetuates the loss of life and cannot be the mode in which life itself is lived" (LD, 171).

[...] transubstantiation” of the all-devouring Fascist order that will forge the world in its image and thereby undo it, as Dale Carter puts it.⁶⁴⁷

At the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*, after a career which rises and falls with the Reich, Weissmann/Blicero is again where he began. He has climbed in “terminal” solitude the peaks of “primal pain” (GR, 97), driven to discover “the edge”, to find out that “there is an end” (GR, 722), but he realises that the discovery of ever-new edges merely perpetuates the “cycle of infection and death” (GR, 723). Europe discovered the edge of the world, America, but refused this gift and established a new “site for its Deathkingdom” (GR, 722). But as “Death and Europe are separate as ever” (GR, 722-23), for Death “has never, in live, become *one with*” (GR, 723), the drama of separation continues and with that the human “mission to propagate death, the structure of it” (GR, 722). The next line of flight, he wonders, then leads to the moon, “our new Deathkingdom” (GR, 723). Blicero identifies this “obsession, addiction” with death as a fall from the life-affirming “savage innocences” (GR, 722), in Freudian terms the lost original unity of Eros and Thanatos that compels humans to be eternally Faustian. Now, as an old man, he purports to have become weary of his striving, yearning for a final way out, a resurrection:

“I want to break out—to leave this cycle of infection and death. I want t be taken in love; so taken that you and I, and death, and life, will be gathered, inseparable, into the radiance of what we would become...” (GR, 724)

Blicero wants to transcend the cycle, to exit the cycle of repression that creates history as an “infection” by death and separation. He claims to overcome the state of eternal division, the disunity of Eros and Thanatos that came with “Europe’s Original Sin”, the “latest name” for which is “Modern Analysis”, and that leads to the “Subsequent Sin” (GR, 722) of domination.⁶⁴⁸

⁶⁴⁷ Dale Carter, *The Final Frontier: The Rise and Fall of the American Rocket State* (London: Verso, 1988), 48.

⁶⁴⁸ See Hite, “Fun Actually”, 692. Note the striking similarity of Settembrini’s argument in *The Magic Mountain* here: “Analysis as an instrument of enlightenment and civilization is good, in so far as it shatters absurd convictions, acts as a solvent upon natural prejudices, and undermines authority; good, in other words, in that it sets free, refines, humanizes, makes slaves ripe for freedom. But it is bad, very bad, in so far as it stands in the way of action, cannot shape the vital forces, maims life at its roots. Analysis can be a very unappetizing affair, as much so as death, with which it may well belong – allied to the grave and its unsavory anatomy” (MM, 222).

Ironically, however, Blicero's notion of freedom leads to yet further repression, fully in accord with an observation Mann expresses in *The Magic Mountain*:

Freedom, indeed, was a conception rather romantic than illuminating. Like romanticism, it inevitably limited the human impulse to expansion; and the passionate individualism in them both had similar repressive results. (MM, 695)

Not only does it transpire that Blicero's dream of escape is intimately related to a colonial fantasy of sorts, the vision of a giant glass sphere in space inhibited by a male community. His entire conception of flight is based on and bound to revert into repression. As Hite demonstrates, Pynchon has Blicero speak "textual and Marcusan truths" about the course of the "special Death the West had invented" (GR, 722), leading from Europe to the edges of the world and back.⁶⁴⁹ Already dying, allegedly, Blicero intends to fire his lover Gottfried ('God's peace') skyward in order to grant him "immortality" (GR, 723). Gottfried conceives of his sacrifice as a gift of love: Blicero "wants to give, without expecting anything back, give away what he loves" (GR, 721). There is infinite cynicism entailed in this offer, and when Blicero states "I want to get through it as honestly as I can" (GR, 723), this is more than ample indication that his speech to Gottfried can by no means taken at face value.⁶⁵⁰

The Great Firing, or "Easter Rising" of the 00000, significantly taking place on April Fool's Day, is indeed everything but innocent, both as regards Blicero's intentions and the poetic 'justifications' of the firing. Pondering on Katje's suitability as a sacrificial victim, for instance, Weissmann thinks of the jubilant propagation of the "Flame" in Rilke's Sonnet II, xii:

"Want the Change," Rilke said, "O be inspired by the Flame!" To laurel, to nightingale, to wind
... wanting it, to be taken, to embrace, to fall toward the flame growing to fill all the senses and
... not to love because it was no longer possible to act... but to be helplessly in a condition of
love... (GR, 97)

⁶⁴⁹ Hite, "Fun Actually", 688.

⁶⁵⁰ A gesture of love, Eros, aimed at establishing immortality, Blicero's offer directly relates to the miniature interpretation of Faust in *Eros and Civilization*. Faust, according to Marcuse, demands the pleasure principle (Eros), not the beautiful moment but eternity (EC, 234). If the rocket firing then is an act of satisfying the pleasure principle, however, it demonstrates that uncontrolled Eros is as fatal as Thanatos (EC, 11).

This image of transformation in fire recurs in his comment on the death of multiple thousands of soldiers since 1939. Asking himself if any of them, any of “this raw material, ‘want the Change’”, Blicero concludes that their reflexes were “only being used” by those in power the “Flame has inspired” (GR, 98), including himself. It is such reflexes, the ability to plunge into submission, that Blicero seeks in Katje, but as her “masochism [...] is reassurance”, a means to remind her of the human capability to feel pain, he eventually chooses Gottfried as the perfect victim because the boy is capable of “true submission, of letting go the self and passing into the All” (GR, 662). This ‘letting go’, however, is meant neither in a mystical nor romantic sense but is a matter of true submission to the technological order, of Gottfried dwelling in a cage (GR, 102) and dreaming to become an engineer, of considering the rockets as “pet animals”, and of getting erections when the word *bitch* is spoken “in a certain tone of voice” (GR, 103). Gottfried’s ability of feeling “*taken*, at true ease” (*ibid.*) expresses hardly more than a state where, in Marcuse’s words, “repression has become so effective that, for the repressed, it assumes the (illusory) form of freedom” (EC, 224).

Against the background of this discrepancy, Blicero’s allegedly romanticised notion of transcendence betrays a much more calculating character, and when he purports to grant Gottfried a unification of life and death in a terminal act by which the cycle of infection with death is overcome, behind this romantic topos of *Liebestod* stands nothing but a totalitarian gesture.⁶⁵¹ As Žižek argues, the

“Death Drive” is not a biological fact but a notion indicating that the human psychic apparatus is subordinated to a blind automatism of repetition beyond pleasure-seeking, self-preservation, accordance between man and his milieu. Man is—Hegel *dixit*—‘an animal sick unto death’, an animal extorted by an insatiable parasite (reason, logos, language). In this perspective, the ‘death drive’, this dimension of radical negativity, cannot be reduced to an expression of alienated social conditions, it defines la *condition humaine* as such: there is no solution, no escape from it; the thing to do is not to ‘overcome’, to ‘abolish’ it, but to come to terms with it, to learn to recognize it in its terrifying dimension and then, on the basis of this fundamental recognition, to try to articulate a *modus vivendi* with it.

All ‘culture’ is in a way a reaction-formation, an attempt to limit, canalize—to cultivate this imbalance, this traumatic kernel, this radical antagonism through which man cuts his umbilical

⁶⁵¹ This topos is invariably associated with Fascism in Pynchon’s work, most prominently in the relationship of Lady V. with her fetish Mélanie, who engage in a “variation on [...] the Tristan-and-Iseult theme, indeed, according to some, [...] of all Romanticism since the Middle Ages: ‘the act of love and the act of death are one.’ Dead at last, they would be one with the inanimate universe and with each other” (V., 410).

cord with nature, with animal homeostasis. It is not only that the aim is no longer to abolish this drive antagonism, but the aspiration to abolish it is precisely the source of totalitarian temptation: the greatest mass murders and holocausts have always been perpetrated in the name of man as harmonious being, of a New Man without antagonistic tension.⁶⁵²

Žižek's comment on totalitarian logics, I think, is crucial as regards Pynchon's treatment of notions of antagonism and unity. Especially passages like Roger Mexico's remark that the "[t]he War, the Empire, will expedite [...] barriers between our lives. The War needs to divide this way [...] it wants a machine of many separate parts, not oneness, but a complexity" (GR, 130-31) easily lead one to assume that the author betrays a nostalgia for lost unity and a tensionless mode of being. As Hanjo Berressem attentively argues, however, Pynchon also continually stresses "that the aporia of the human condition is exactly that the subject cannot regain a naturality it has irretrievably lost".⁶⁵³ And as argued earlier, where Pynchon's characters propagate holistic harmonious visions, paranoia and hubristic messianism are not far.

By manner of analogy, I argue, Weissmann's pseudo-romantic symbolism cannot distract from the literalness of his murder. In this ghoulish antithesis to Christ's resurrection, Pynchon blends hermetic imagery, totalitarian ideas, and, significantly, allusions to Brown's *Love's Body*. The minuscule chapters "Isaac", "Pre-Launch", "Countdown", and "Ascent" are permeated with arcane symbolism, from Merkabah Mysticism to hermetic imagery, Cabbala, and allusions to freemasonry. Although attempts have been undertaken to unify these allusions in a coherent mythological framework, these remain eventually inconclusive.⁶⁵⁴ For Brown a return to symbolism would be the end of Protestant literalism that informs the modern historical consciousness (LB, 191, 198) and a revival of the spirit killed by the letter. It is in the Christian redemption as symbolism (LB, 202) that we rise from "history to mystery", experiencing a resurrection of the body and spirit, a second "coming in us" (LB, 214). Where Brown lauds that "[e]verything is symbolic, everything is holy" (LB, 239), however, Pynchon counters with "Weissmann has engineered all the symbolism today" (GR, 750), and when the "last gestures toward the possibility of magic" (GR, 750) have been made before the firing, Pynchon's narrator shifts from exuberant

⁶⁵² Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), xxvii-xxviii.

⁶⁵³ Berressem, *Pynchon's Poetics*, 185.

⁶⁵⁴ See Moore's reading of Mercurius archetypes (*The Style of Connectedness*, 106) and Weisenburger's reading of Merkabah mysticism symbols (*A 'Gravity's Rainbow' Companion*, 377-78).

symbolism to a technical description of the hardware surrounding Gottfried. With “no return channel to the ground” (GR, 751) installed in the rocket, Blicero is not interested in sharing Gottfried’s experience of total consummation, for the boy is to be *pharmakos*, a victim of repression and Apollonian sublimation.⁶⁵⁵ As mentioned, Brown discusses Apollo as the god of sublimation, of the life negating flight from the unity of instinctual opposites such as life and death, male and female, Self and Other (cf. LD, 175). Gottfried, one reads, is strung into the “Apollonian dream” (GR, 754). Shrouded in Imipolex G, the erectile polymer (genital organisation) that determines the shape and sensations of the “creature” encased in it (GR, 699-700), he waits in total submission, dreaming, and “waiting for whatever will fall on him” (GR, 754). Like Enzian, however, Gottfried will not transcend, and if he is “elevated” (GR, 661), then it is only to meet his death, the “exact moment” of which “will never be known” (GR, 751). The Apollonian dream in which Gottfried is strung is thereby overtaken by the same irony as the Apollonian form of the chemists Kerkulé, Carothers, and Jamf in that its flight from death becomes deathly (cf. LD, 157). The rocket becomes an epitome of the world of technical simulations incapable of reflecting any reality outside, and Gottfried a white wall of the narcissistic psychology behind Blicero’s technological rationale: “the flame is too bright for anyone to see Gottfried inside, except now as an erotic category, hallucinated out of that blue violence, for purposes of self-arousal” (GR, 758). As much as Gottfried’s turns out to be a masturbatory fantasy, Blicero’s Apollonian dream transpires to be a sterile mirror of unification. In the moment before his ascent, Gottfried will awake from his dreaming “into the breath of what was always real” (GR, 754), the same breath Pöckler experiences in the darkest corner of Dora Mittelbau. The Apollonian dream becomes reality for Gottfried—“At last: something real” (*ibid.*)—in that he experiences for an instant the promise of the god Apollo who told man “to look at the stars” (LD, 174). At the moment of Brennschluss that initiates the rocket’s descent, the “first star hangs between” Gottfried’s feet (GR, 760). In this transition to the ‘real’, Pynchon’s narrator dismantles any spiritual import, and as brilliantly overcharged with symbolism as the firing is, Blicero’s switchboard sorcery at the fire-control car (GR, 757-58) remains a technicality, the operation of a disenchanting Spenglerian “sorcerer” (DW, 2:500) in the service of technological progress. The very ‘materials’ serving his gesture of

⁶⁵⁵ Prompted by the title “Isaac” of one of the launch sections, Eddins sees in Blicero a parodic Abraham, who sacrifices without the intervention of God (*The Gnostic Pynchon*, 148).

liberation gained by repression (steel, Imipolex G, Gottfried), and the 00000 being first and foremost destructive hardware, his Great Firing does nothing but perpetuate the “dialectic of cumulative repression, guilt, and aggression” (LD, 174).⁶⁵⁶ Just as the rocket’s “promise of escape” will be “betrayed to” the force of “Gravity” (GR, 758), his performance will remain in the service of death.

Weissmann/Blicero disappears from the Zone. Enzian thinks: “Whatever happened at the end, he has transcended. Even if he’s only dead. He’s gone beyond *his* pain, *his* sin” (GR, 660). But Pynchon suggests:

If you’re wondering where he’s gone, look among the successful academics, the Presidential advisers, the token intellectuals who sit on boards of directors. He is almost surely there. Look high, not low. (GR, 749)

Weissmann’s future is “The World”.

As Pynchon writes *sub rosa* about the totalitarian dangers of his own culture, it is no wonder that he alludes to post-Freudian, countercultural discourse in Weissmann’s soteriological project. As the latter has not been paid much attention in Pynchon scholarship, a brief treatment is necessary here. Blicero, in some senses, is not only working with the prevailing hegemony but also expresses countercultural thought, as Pynchon indicates: he is a “Wandervogel in the mountain of Pain” (GR, 99).⁶⁵⁷ That Blicero, this representative of the death drive, thereby partly becomes a spokesperson for Marcuse and Brown is by no means arbitrary. For Brown (like for Freud and Marcuse), the Fall of Man is caused by the division of original unity, the splitting of a unitary psyche, or mind-body. In *Life Against Death*, Brown proposes that a real “possibility of redemption lies in the reunification of the instinctual opposites [...] Life (Eros) and Death” (LD, 86), which he renders an open challenge in the last

⁶⁵⁶ Noteworthy, in this context, is a point made by Marcuse. In “Aggressiveness in Advanced Industrial Societies”, he writes that “the act of aggression is physically carried out by a mechanism with a high degree of automatism, of far greater power than the individual human being who sets it in motion [...] The most extreme case is the rocket or missile [...] Aggression is, as it were, transferred from a subject to an object, or is at least ‘mediated’ by an object”. Herbert Marcuse, *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (London: Mayfly Books, 2009), 198.

⁶⁵⁷ As there were no socially validated practices for a ‘self’ available for bourgeois intellectuals in Wilhelmine Germany, according to Goldman, a number of oppositional movements and ‘countercultural’ practices emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century in Germany, one of them being the Wandervogel movement (*Politics, Death, and the Devil*, 270). This movement can largely be characterised as apolitical ‘countercultural’ with aspirations “toward simple escape into nature from the confining strictures of urban industrial civilization” (*ibid.*, 49). The revulsion against the rationalised systems of drill, success, power, materialism as represented in ‘disenchanted’ Germany at the time, led the Wandervogel to abandon rational thought and withdraw into nature.

chapter about the resurrection of the body. In the fragmentary and symbolic *Love's Body* Brown lays out an answer. There, he sees “the distinction between inner self and outside world, between subject and object” (LB, 253) dissolved by a fusion in “fire”. The poetic pieces of the chapter of the same name not merely prefigure Blicero’s idea to have the individual “united with the all, in a consuming fire” (LB, 177) but also his notion of sacrifice: “The true sacrifice is total, holocaust. *Consumatum est*” (*ibid.*). Pynchon, then, as I contend, does not use Rilke’s image of the flame merely to expose the ‘German’ idolisation of transcendence, as Hume argues,⁶⁵⁸ but he also ironically questions the symbolism of unification in Brown’s *Love's Body*, which features the very same quotation by Rilke:

Learn to love the fire. The alchemical fire of transmutation: *Wolle die Wandlung. O sei für die Flamme begeistert*. To be content with the purgatorial fire. The fires of hell [...] (LB, 178-79)

However, to say that by making Weissmann a spokesman for a ‘Nazified’ Rilke and Brown exposes a Fascist strain in the latter’s discourse would fail to acknowledge the acrid irony of *Gravity's Rainbow*. If the mixture of mythological allusions and technological descriptions Pynchon uses in association with the rocket reflect the interplay between folk-mysticism, *völkisch* consciousness and instrumental rationality that fuelled the Third Reich, then Pynchon’s allusions to *Love's Body* in the midst of the firing of rocket that will fly to a Los Angeles movie theatre in 1973 seriously probe into the viability of the latter’s mysticism. While *Gravity's Rainbow* predominantly follows Brown as regards the analysis of the state of repression, for Pynchon, who employs Freudian concepts only tongue-in-cheek, Brown’s symbolism must have appeared as puzzling as for Marcuse, who held in response to *Love's Body* that Brown

obliterates the decisive difference between real and artificial, natural and political, fulfilling and repressive boundaries and divisions. [...] The sinister images of ‘burning’ and ‘sacrifice’ recur in Brown’s vision” but “[n]o symbolism can repulse the repressive connotation: one cannot love in fire”.⁶⁵⁹

Although Pynchon avoids indicators of jocularly in his *reductio ad absurdum* of

⁶⁵⁸ Hume, *Pynchon's Mythography*, 173.

⁶⁵⁹ Marcuse, “Love Mystified”, *Negations*, 179.

Brown's aphorisms, other sections of *Gravity's Rainbow* show a critical distance to the subject matter, specifically the ironic comment on the "Oedipal situation in the Zone" (GR, 747) and Enzian's musing about the "true nature" of war. For Brown the "fires of war are a Satanic parody" of the true fire (LB, 181), but although he does not share any "Fascist inclination to dismiss the reality of horror as 'mere propaganda'" in the designation 'phoney war',⁶⁶⁰ his notion of 'parody' tends to obfuscate politics and human responsibilities.⁶⁶¹ Pynchon follows suit in this respect in that he has Enzian dismiss the 'truth' that the war "was never political at all, the politics was all theatre, all just to keep the people distracted" (GR, 521). Yet Pynchon does also leave no doubt that concoctions of this kind, whether Platonic or conspiratory, are paranoid. Given his critical treatment of Brown, and that of metapsychology in general, it is therefore no wonder that the scathing satire of *Gravity's Rainbow* does not spare the latter's soteriology. In juxtaposing Brown's mythical resolution of the basic tension between Eros and Thanatos with a Fascist perversion of *homo dei*, then, Pynchon demonstrates how thin the line is between libertarian and totalitarian ideals. There is, in Weismann's words: "*always the danger of falling*" (GR, 723).

3.2 Mondaugen, Pöckler "and evidently quite a few others"

It was not four days after the astounding landing in Normandy that our new retaliatory weapon to which our Führer frequently alluded in advance with genuine elation, made its appearance in the western theater of war: the robot bomb, such an admirable piece of ordnance that only sacred necessity can have inspired the genius who invented it.

—Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus*⁶⁶²

Like Fascism itself, the robot[-bombs] career without a subject. Like it they combine utmost technical perfection with total blindness"

—Adorno, *Minima Moralia*⁶⁶³

⁶⁶⁰ See Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 55.

⁶⁶¹ One of the harshest sections of Marcuse's criticism of Brown reads: "To him [Brown], the political kingdoms are 'shadows', political power is a fraud: the emperor has no new clothes, he has no clothes at all. But unfortunately, he does: they are visible and tangible; they make history. In terms of the latent content, the kingdoms of the earth may be shadows: but unfortunately, they move real men and things, they kill, they persist and prevail in the sunlight as well as in the dark of night. The king may be an erected penis, and his relation to the community may be intercourse; but unfortunately, it is also something very different and less pleasant and more real ("Love Mystified", 177).

⁶⁶² Mann, *Doctor Faustus*, 355.

⁶⁶³ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 55.

In the following sections, I want to further my examination of those strands of *Gravity's Rainbow* that radically demystify the image of Faustian man. Drawing from Tabbi, I will demonstrate how a romantic quest for transcendence and a “*Schwärmerei*” (GR, 238) for control make it possible for characters in the novel to be gathered into a totalitarian technological order. My focus will be on Kurt Mondaugen and Franz Pökler, who best represent what Spengler calls the “priest of the machine”, the “quiet engineer [...] who is the machine’s master and destiny” (DW, 2:505). In both character’ vitae, Pynchon shows how politically naïve discontent with the given and the desperate attempt to remain impartial in the face of the unacceptable constitute a fatalist pact with the ‘devils’ of the Third Reich. In his juxtaposition of the diametrically opposed drives of both men, Pynchon thereby gives an account of two seemingly contradictory sides of Nazism: an atavistic *völkisch* irrationalism directed against modernity and a rationalised socio-political order marked and enabled by organisation and technology. In doing so, he dispenses with one-sided accusations and a simplistic economy of domination but provides a highly differentiated picture of the mechanisms of ‘evil’ that does not fail include the share of the seemingly innocent ‘cogs’ in the system. Again, like in the case of the IG Farben, his stress is not simply on transgressive individuals but entire structures. As already suggested, the main intertextual correlative Pynchon chooses for portraying their bargain is not *Faust*, but, quite aptly, Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*. Enacting an ironic inversion of Castorp’s divination of the human self-mastery that negotiates the position between death and life, recklessness and reason, and mystic community and individualism, he transposes this polarity into the mindset of the contributors to Weissmann’s dream of annihilation. The parallels between the novels of Pynchon and Mann are not only relevant in terms of Mondaugen’s dallying with death or Pökler’s fatalism. Since Mann’s novel is also crucial for my reading of Slothrop’s pseudo-Grail-quest through the Zone, I give a brief overview of *The Magic Mountain* before discussing the ‘seduction’ of both engineers into the Faustian machineries of Nazism.

The protagonist of Mann’s novel, the young engineer Hans Castorp, is a child of his time, a ‘perfectly normal product of North German life’ and the expanding technocratic empire of Hamburg.⁶⁶⁴ While visiting his tubercular cousin in a sanatorium in Davos, Castorp falls in love with Madame Chauchat, the Lady Venus of

⁶⁶⁴ Reed, *Thomas Mann*, 230.

his personal Magic Mountain, where he has to come to terms with one the most alluring power on earth, death,⁶⁶⁵ and as a holy fool in search of meaning amongst death, he is as much antithesis to the Grail hero as Mondaugen and Slothrop in that he fails to revitalise a wasteland but falls into the stupor of apolitical naivety instead. As much as the sanatorium is a vacuum in which Castorp dwells for seven years unaware of the passage of time, it is also a political microcosm of pre-WWI Central Europe, a *mélange* of philistinism, spiritualism, humanism, and radicalism. Taken as a protégé by both the Humanist Settembrini and the radical Jesuit Naphta (modelled after Georg Lukács), Castorp is continually exposed to seemingly irreconcilable opposites (life-death, illness-health, spirit-nature), which cast him into turmoil, at the height of which he has a dreamlike moment of recognition in the famous chapter “Snow”. There, Castorp comes to think:

The recklessness of death is in life, it would not be life without it—and in the centre is the position of *Homo Dei*, between recklessness and reason, and his state is between mystic community and windy individualism. (MM, 496)

Man, in his aristocracy as *homo dei*, masters these opposites. He cannot forget death, but “*For the sake of goodness and love, man shall let death have no sovereignty over his thoughts*” (MM, 496-97)—a thought which itself is soon forgotten. The excellent management of the sanatorium allows for the acquisition of a gramophone, the operation of which is entrusted to Castorp. Frustrated with his inability to reach Chauchat, he becomes an avid listener of Verdi’s *Aida*, Bizet’s *Carmen*, Gounod’s *Faust*, and Schubert’s *Lieder*, and thereby develops highly romanticised notions of love and death. Charmed by the “attitude of mind, [...] so profoundly, so mystically epitomized” in Schubert’s “*Lindenbaum*”, he constructs a “whole world of feeling” (MM, 651) around the song. The narrator asks:

What was the world behind the song, which the motions of his conscience made to seem a world of forbidden love?

It was death.

What utter and explicit madness! That glorious song! An indisputable masterpiece, sprung from the profoundest and holiest depths of racial feeling; a precious possession, the archetype of the genuine, embodied loveliness.

⁶⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 237.

[...]

Yes, self-conquest—that might well be the essence of triumph over this love, this soul-enchantment that bore such sinister fruit! [...] kingdoms might be founded upon it [the “*Lindenbaum*”], earthly, all-too-earthly kingdoms [...] But its faithful son might [...] be he who consumed his life in self-conquest, and died, on his lips the new word of love, which as yet he knew not how to speak. Ah, it was worth dying for, the enchanted *lied*! But he who died for it, died indeed no longer for it; was a hero only because he died for the new, the new word of love and the future that whispered in his heart. (MM, 652-53)

While Chauchat leaves for good, Castorp stays on, listening to Schubert and the never-ending arguments between Settembrini and Naphta, eventually falling into stupor, from which he is woken at the outbreak of WWI. Descending the mountain and joining the army, he eventually goes to fight in a war for his all-too-earthly ‘kingdom’ with lines from the “Linden-tree” on his lips (MM, 715). His ‘fate’ thereby gives a bitter twist to Chauchat’s prediction that he will help make his country great and powerful.

3.2.1. Kurt Mondaugen

In the besieged political microcosm of the German protectorate of southwest Africa, V.’s Hugh Godolphin muses that between the wars the “world frowns now on youth in a vacuum, it insists youth be turned-to, utilized, exploited” (V., 249). Pynchon allegorises this utilisation in two fragmentary miniature ‘novels of education’ about the young Weimar Republic engineers Mondaugen and Pökler, who both develop rocket technology for Major Weissmann in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. In Mondaugen’s case the co-optation by the Nazi technocrat becomes a dubious matter of destiny, for Mondaugen will not only fulfil Weissmann’s prediction that “[s]omeday we’ll need you [...] Specialized and limited as you are, you fellows will be valuable” (V., 244). Attempting to escape the European ambience of chaos, decadence and death, Mondaugen embraces a Fascist mysticism that effectually perpetuates what he intends to transgress. In V., Pynchon covers the onset of this bargain with intertextual echoes from *The Magic Mountain*.⁶⁶⁶ Having left “depression-time in Munich” where he read with Pökler at the T.U. for the “mirror-time” (V., 230) of the German *southwest* African protectorate in 1922, in which he is to record atmospheric radio disturbances

⁶⁶⁶ See Dugdale, *Thomas Pynchon*, 93.

(Sferics), Mondaugen arrives in the onset of the Bondelswarts ‘rebellion’. “[S]omething of a coward” (V., 232), he takes refuge in Foppl’s villa and stays there for two and a half months hermetically sealed off from the rest of the district (V., 235), drifting into stupor. Just like Castorp, he struggles with a seductive power. This power is not death itself but the suspicion that there is nothing beyond the “Kingdom of Death” (V., 273) surrounding him. As Mondaugen falls ill, Weissmann assumes the role of decoding the Sferics transmissions, successfully extracting a jumbled message. He obtains an anagram of Mondaugen’s name, and the rest of the message is: “DIEWELTISTALLESWASDERFALLIST” (V., 278), the opening proposition of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus* (1921). The irony of this message lies, according to Tanner in that fact that the secret Mondaugen had been looking for (that there must be something beyond the given) is that there is no secret (that is, only the given).⁶⁶⁷ More alarmingly, however, as Samuel Thomas notes, this message means: “there is no legitimate social or political alternative”.⁶⁶⁸ As Dugdale has pointed out, it would be advantageous for Weissmann if Mondaugen “accepted the philosophy condensed in the proposition” since the assumption of pure immanence weakens “resistance to totalitarianism”.⁶⁶⁹ Any interpretation of the message as a confirmation of absolute integration, however, as Thomas points out, does not fully acknowledge that “the very presence of the message in the sferics suggests” that the world is not all that is the case.⁶⁷⁰ The two messages thus contained in the recording (immanence and transcendence), despite the fact that it has been ‘decoded’ (maybe even manufactured) by Weissmann, in fact opens a realm of personal choice for Mondaugen.⁶⁷¹

In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, one learns that the engineer seems to have made his choice: during the months of stupor and debauchery at Foppl’s, Mondaugen becomes “haunted by a profound disgust for everything European” (GR, 403). This “soul-depression” of decadence and cruelty he anticipates to “infest Europe as it infested” the enclave in the Southwest protectorate (V., 277) drives Mondaugen into exile in the Kalahari, with Weissmann notably being “one of the people who had driven” him there (GR, 408). Living in the bush with the poorest of the Hereros, he has a

⁶⁶⁷ Tanner, *City of Words*, 158-59.

⁶⁶⁸ Samuel Thomas, *Pynchon and the Political* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 85.

⁶⁶⁹ Dugdale, *Thomas Pynchon*, 93.

⁶⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷¹ The double message of a world devoid of a “beyond” and a personal greeting from “angelic orders” allows Mondaugen to choose whether he wants to believe in immanence or transcendence (*The Style of Connectedness*, 97).

transformative experience. Enlightened with “electro-mysticism”, he begins to see himself as a “radio transmitter of some kind” (GR, 404). Moore comments his ‘conversion’ as follows: Mondaugen has “heard Puritanwise, in Südwest, the voice of his calling: to work on means for penetrating those heavens out of which angels have spoken to him”.⁶⁷² If Mondaugen’s conversion shows parallels with the Puritan ‘election’ by divine word, however, he does not penetrate the heavens. I would rather argue that Pynchon models his character’s turn along Mann’s “Snow”-chapter, with the difference that Mondaugen divines a vision of future inhumanity in which Mann’s notion of blood sacrifice at the core of civilization is cruelly inverted (cf. my chapter 6.5). In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Mondaugen has returned to Germany and reunites with his former T.U. fellow Pöckler in the A4 development project at Kummersdorf in 1934.⁶⁷³ There he appears as one

of these German mystics who grew up reading Hesse, Stefan George, and Richard Wilhelm, ready to accept Hitler on the basis of Demian-metaphysics, he seemed to look at fuel and oxidizer as paired opposites, male and female, principles uniting in the mystical egg of the combustion chamber [...] (GR, 403)⁶⁷⁴

Such metaphysics inform Mondaugen’s sense of alienation among the European ‘sickness’ of the 1920s and his wish to break through the limits imposed by his destiny as designated by Weissmann. In Hesse’s *Demian*, as Giovanni Filoramo points out, the Gnostic sentiment of alienation within the world is merged with

the Romantic sentiment par excellence: the sentiment of the limits imposed by destiny and the desire to break through these limits, to destroy the human condition, to break out of everything.⁶⁷⁵

⁶⁷² *Ibid.*, 94.

⁶⁷³ Mondaugen and Weissmann are two of Pynchon’s characters that appear in more than one of his works. For an overview of the relationships and genealogies of characters throughout Pynchon’s Oeuvre see Patrick Hurley’s *Pynchon’s Characters: A Dictionary* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2008).

⁶⁷⁴ In orphic cosmogony, chaos gives birth to Nyx, the primordial goddess of the night. She lays an egg in the bosom of Erebus, the deity of shadows and darkness, from which the bisexual god Phanes (Eros) hatches, who creates the other gods and the worlds. The orphic image recurs in the firing of a rocket prototype, “a tiny silver egg” (GR, 161), and in “oh, Egg, the flying Rocket hatched from” (GR, 509).

⁶⁷⁵ Giovanni Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. Anthony Alcock (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), xviii, citing S. Pétrement, *Le Dualisme chez laton, les gnostiques et les manichéens*.

The parabola of Mondaugen's romantic flight from Weissmann's proposition of total integration, and thus from his 'destiny', however, leads him back to the very alternative to the pre-war vacuum and 'soul-depression' offered by Nazis like Weissmann.⁶⁷⁶ Rather than blandly presenting his turn as analogous to Faust's renunciation of Christianity,⁶⁷⁷ Pynchon's mythography aims at a concrete Fascist psychopathology.⁶⁷⁸ When three men are accidentally killed at the rocket test stand, Mondaugen takes this as a sign: "First blood, first sacrifice" (GR, 403). This notion of bloodshed as a human sacrifice to higher causes is the kind of rhetoric Adorno observed "during the first years of Hitlerism in Germany", when murder was invested with the aura of sacrament.⁶⁷⁹ And as in totalitarian violence, this sadistic impulse, as represented in the firing of the rocket, has a masochistic counterpoint: "The act is undivided. You are both aggressor and victim" (GR, 403).⁶⁸⁰ Mondaugen "understands" this act of becoming "one with" the rocket's forces. Conceptualising the rocket development in terms of Orphic cosmogony, he crudely misconstrues the inhumane ends for which his mimicry of "life's essential activity" is used in the V-2 research and development group:⁶⁸¹ in the service of Eros, as Freud writes, the death drive finds expression in an urge to destruction directed against the external world.⁶⁸² Where Pökler considers the rocket as a "*technologique*" with "its own vitality" (GR, 401), Mondaugen perceives the work of Thanatos as the live-giving creativity of Phanes/Eros, and his contribution to the pursuit of technological aggression, is

⁶⁷⁶ Mondaugen's political naivety is significant in this respect. In their examination of the evolution of "Mondaugen's Story" Luc Herman and John Krafft point out that in the typescript, the "engineer is a highly political animal", shifting from "from radical to Ultra". Luc Herman and John Krafft, "From the Ground Up: The Evolution of the South-West Africa Chapter in Pynchon's V.", *Contemporary Literature* 47, no. 2 (2006), 286. In the published version, Mondaugen appears as a political naïf. When asked if he has heard of the Fascisti or the National Socialist German Worker's Party, Mondaugen retorts "So many capital letters", apologising for his disinterest with "I'm an engineer you see. Politics isn't my line", and finally showing a crudely limited understanding: "Politics is a kind of engineering, isn't it? With people as your raw material" (V., 242).

⁶⁷⁷ In V., Mondaugen's denomination is ironically symbolised in a stained-glass window "portraying an early Christian martyr" in Foppl's villa, through which the engineer has access to the antennas on the roof (V. 236). Price argues in this context that this image establishes links between Christians (persecuted during the reign of the Roman Emperor Nero) with other groups suffering persecution, such as Hereros and Jews (*Christian Allegories*, 103-4).

⁶⁷⁸ Although Mondaugen is an atypical representative of an "authoritarian personality" in Adorno's terms, his sadomasochism and obedience to the Führer-principle are fully within the scale of this personality pattern; cf. Stephen Crook, "Introduction", in *The Stars Down to Earth and Other Essays on Irrational Culture*, by Theodor W. Adorno, ed. Stephen Crook (London: Routledge, 2002), 8-10.

⁶⁷⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, "Anti-Semitism and Fascist Propaganda", in *The Stars Down to Earth*, 230; cf. Zafirovski, *The Protestant Ethic*, 241-42.

⁶⁸⁰ See Cook, "Introduction", 29.

⁶⁸¹ Moore, *The Style of Connectedness*, 177.

⁶⁸² See Sigmund Freud, "The Ego and the Id", *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 131; *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 56.

accompanied by a reduced sense of guilt.⁶⁸³ If the masses following National Socialism, as Adorno writes, felt “themselves part of a mystic community and filled with the certainty of forgiveness for their sins”,⁶⁸⁴ Pynchon, significantly, hints at Mondaugen’s subjective guiltlessness by fusing the language of electrical engineering with allusions to Brown’s contrastive analysis of archaic and modern conceptions of time. In the engineer’s mysticism, the triode is as “basic as the cross in Christianity”:

Think of the ego, the self that suffers a personal history bound to time, as the grid. The deeper and true Self is the flow between cathode and plate. The constant, pure flow. Signals—sense-data, feelings, memories relocating—are put onto the grid, and modulate the flow. We live lives that are waveforms constantly changing with time, now positive, now negative. Only at moments of great serenity is it possible to find the pure, the informationless state of signal zero. (GR, 404)

In Brown’s exegesis of Freud, time is “neurotic and correlative with instinctual repression” (LD, 274). While time belongs to the ego (LD, 275), in the “unconscious there is no time” (LD, 274). An abolition of the Protestant/Faustian complex of guilt and repression enables humans to transcend historical consciousness and lay their Faustian strife to rest (LD, 277-78). Under conditions of general repression only “mystical consciousness” is able to discard time (LD, 274). Pynchon satirises this proposition in Mondaugen’s mysticism, but as in the case of Slothrop’s shrinking temporal bandwidth, formulated in Mondaugen’s Law (GR, 509), the abandonment of time is not only concomitant with an increased sense of guilt but also of obligation.⁶⁸⁵ While Slothrop’s receding sense of obligation presents a case of breaking with the “historical destiny” imposed on modern societies by the guilt complex (LD, 278), as I will argue later, Mondaugen’s mystic retreat into atavism is presented as a plunge into instinctual urges (cf. LD, 276). Thus, like his fellow engineer Achtfaden, who decides to work for the seedy filmmaker von Göll as submissively as he served Weissmann

⁶⁸³ As Marcuse writes: “[T]he whole Western practice of the domination of nature and the sublimation of aggression in production and accumulation is characterised as constructive Eros: Eros makes use of sublimated aggression for its own ends and, in the movement of becoming (this applies just as much to political economy), death is distilled as negativity into homeopathic doses” (EC, 148-49).

⁶⁸⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, “Research Project on Anti-Semitism”, in *The Stars Down to Earth*, 186.

⁶⁸⁵ Pynchon’s juxtaposition of Fascist sensibilities and allusions to Brown does not merely comment on the psychological disposition of the German engineer. As Mark Sanders, for instance argues, such ‘chronotopic’ arrangements conflate German sensibilities with that of post-war America. Mark Sanders, “The politics of literary reinscription in Thomas Pynchon’s *V.*”, *Critique* 39:1 (1997): 84; cf. Seed, *The Fictional Labyrinths*, 241.

before,⁶⁸⁶ Mondaugen stays amongst the “champions, adepts, magicians of all ranks and orders [who] will be in the field more than ever before in the history of the game” (GR, 508), continuing the Apollonian (read Faustian) dream. And just as Castorp lives up to his fate of becoming ‘useful’ by sacrificing himself, so does Mondaugen— in and beyond the Zone.

3.2.2. Fate and Fatalism: Franz Pökler

If the Faustian dream interlocks with the mystified Fascism of Mondaugen, it does equally so with the psychological predisposition of the chemical engineer Pökler, one of Spengler’s “hundred thousand talented, rigorously schooled brains” upon which industry and progress depend (DW, 2:505). His talent, limited political interest (GR, 400), fascination with space-travel and obsession with control make this moderate movie-going bourgeois the “type they want” (GR, 154), an example par excellence of how “technology can create separate identities that are all too readily gathered into a totalitarian order”.⁶⁸⁷ A political allegory of the Weimar Republic German, he surrenders his “personal identity” to “impersonal salvation” (GR, 406) in order to overcome the poverty and confusion of bureaucratized democracy.⁶⁸⁸

Like Mondaugen, Pökler is a “youth in a vacuum” (V., 249) between wars. Infatuated with a dreadful sense of Destiny, “darkness latent in the texture of the summer wind” (GR, 162), he swims under the surface of his rationality in “fantasy, death-wish, rocket-mysticism” (GR, 154), developing a “contradictory urge toward personal security and collective extinction”, as Tabbi notes.⁶⁸⁹ Pynchon does not present these urges as mystified Freudian categories, however, but first and foremost as ideological constructs conveyed in university lecture theatres and expressionist cinema. In Munich, Pökler sits in the lectures of the aging Jamf, fascinated by the latter’s heresies and his pursuit of the Faustian “absolute” (GR, 577). What especially sticks in Pökler’s mind is Jamf’s rhetoric of unleashed inner forces that transcend compromises and restraint. In the spectacle of the Weimar Republic’s cinema, Pökler again encounters a harsh polarity between unleashed chaos and tyrannical leadership. In recording the engineer’s reception of Fritz Lang movies, the depiction of which is

⁶⁸⁶ See Tabbi, *Postmodern Sublime*, 97.

⁶⁸⁷ Tabbi, *Postmodern Sublime*, 104.

⁶⁸⁸ Moore, *The Style of Connectedness*, 95.

⁶⁸⁹ Tabbi, *Postmodern Sublime*, 94.

greatly informed by Kracauer's analysis *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947), Pynchon combines this polarity with a Spenglerian sensibility. Kracauer writes of the post-war period, that between 1920 and 1924 Germans apparently held that "they had no choice other than" a tyrannical regime or the "cataclysm of anarchy", the world turning "into a chaos with all passions and instincts breaking loose" (CH, 88).⁶⁹⁰ Since either possibility was pregnant with doom, the popular German imagination resorted to the concept of fate, as this "majestic event [...] stirred metaphysical shudders" and "at least had grandeur" (*ibid.*). Unsurprisingly, Kracauer discusses Spengler's sweepingly successful *The Decline of the West* in this context, the vision of which not only "seemed to derive its timely prophecy of decline from laws inherent in history itself" but also "conformed to the emotional situation so perfectly" (*ibid.*). Considering such notions of fate as pre-Fascist ideology, Kracauer correlates the depiction of tyranny and chaos in Fritz Lang's *Dr. Mabuse, Der Spieler* (1922) with the political situation in Weimar, condensing Lang's message to the assertion that while "chaos breeds tyrants like Mabuse who, for their part, capitalize on chaos", not the "slightest allusion to true freedom interferes with the persistent alternative" of these two forces (CH, 84, 83). In a discussion of *Der Müde Tod* (1921) and *Die Nibelungen* (1924), both of which are of particular significance for Pökler in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Kracauer then relates tyranny and chaos to Spenglerian notions of fate. In his analysis, the plot of *Der Müde Tod* "forces" one crucial message upon the audience, namely "that, however arbitrary they seem, the actions of tyrants are realizations of Fate" (CH, 90), which eventually demand the individual's self-renunciation, an ideological feat Kracauer sees glossed over by the film's concluding message that "He who loses his life gains it" (*ibid.*). While fate manifests itself here through the actions of tyrants, it does so "through the anarchical outbursts of ungovernable instincts and passions" in the orgy of destruction in *The Nibelungen*, most conspicuously so in Attila's suicide (*ibid.*).

In *Gravity's Rainbow*, these ideologemes become for Pökler a correlative to his political and social environment. While Bernhard Goetzke (as Death in *Der müde Tod* and State Attorney von Wenk in *Mabuse*) represents for him the "great Weimar

⁶⁹⁰ Scholarly work on *Gravity's Rainbow* and film is extensive, from Charles Clerc's almost comprehensive account of film in *Gravity's Rainbow* to Hanjo Berressem's lucid analysis of "Film as Text" (*Pynchon's Poetics*, 151-190), I will merely focus on aspects of Pökler's Faustian "compact" with fatalism in relation to Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler*. Significantly, Murnau's *Faust* (1926), dismissed by Kracauer as lukewarm, is not alluded to in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

inertia” (GR, 579) of bureaucracies, hierarchies, and exhausting routines, Pökler senses in the disruptive characters and outcasts played by Rudolf Klein-Rogge, King Attila and Mabuse, the affirmation of untameable power, passion, and a drive to extinction. It is Klein-Rogge’s face that he attaches to Jamf’s idea of an inner lion (GR, 578) and onto which he projects a masochistic feeling of

ritual submissions to the Master of this night space and of himself, the male embodiment of a technologicque that embraced power not for its social uses but just those chances of surrender, personal and dark surrender, to the Void, to delicious and screaming collapse [...] (GR, 578)

Fritz Lang’s spectacle, as Pynchon depicts it, prefigures Fascism as a “cult of the archaic completely fitted out by modern technology”, in Debord’s terms, a “degenerate ersatz of myth” that appeals to the inner lion by the “violent resurrection of myth calling for participation in a community defined by archaic pseudo-values”.⁶⁹¹ These master fantasies of the UFA spectacle, however, do not merely mediate an irrational call for masochistic nihilism and bloodshed but also a “social relationship”, at the root of which lies a “specialization of power” and propagation of charismatic leader figures.⁶⁹² Pökler, “and evidently quite a few others” (GR, 578) see in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927) the ideal of a

Corporate City-state where technology was the source of power, the engineer worked closely with the administrator, the masses labored unseen far underground, and ultimate power lay with a single leader at the top, fatherly, and benevolent and just [...] (*ibid.*)

As a youth in Jamf’s lecture hall Pökler had longed to be a “mad inventor [...] indispensable to those who ran the Metropolis, yet, at the end, the untameable lion who could let it all crash” (GR, 578), and in the collective loneliness of the cinema he has found a human face to attach to this inner lion. However attracted he may be to Klein-Rogge’s unrestrained power and will to extinction, Pökler nevertheless falls asleep during *Nibelungen* (GR, 159), and his fascination with the Void remains a “nervous drive toward myth he doesn’t even know if he believes in” (GR, 579). For Pökler, the “pornographies” of love and destruction remain an experience within the

⁶⁹¹ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 109.

⁶⁹² *Ibid.*, 4, 23.

“Absolute Comfort” (GR, 155) of the cinema so detested by his wife’s comrade Vanya, for even when the Rocket’s call to extinction will later catch him at his worst “loneliness and failure” he still isn’t “quite convinced” (GR, 405-6).⁶⁹³ Although Pökler will follow the Nazi trajectory as Mondaugen does, the Rocket remains for him as radically other as Fascist metaphysics. Yet this “poor harassed German soul” (GR, 426) is not an innocent “Victim in a Vacuum” (GR, 414) who, seduced by the master fantasies of UFA productions, falls into the hands of a totalitarian regime. To resort to Pynchon’s technical metaphor, it is his attempt to reduce “the Rocket’s terrible passage [...], literally, to bourgeois terms” (GR, 239), that will have him actively contribute to the Oven State’s terror. In Nietzsche’s words: “When the German ceases to be Faust, there is no greater danger than that he will become a philistine and go to the devil – heavenly powers alone can save him”.⁶⁹⁴

If “[r]ational sobriety had the merit of [...] protecting the Puritan from the corruption of the world’s [...] disorganization”,⁶⁹⁵ and the extension of this quality guaranteed a stability of the authoritarian social compact, then the bourgeois moderation and proclivity toward analysis of the German engineers fulfils the same purpose. Pynchon uses a technical metaphor to express the narrow state of mind of young Pökler and his associates, in which edges are “hardly ever glimpsed, much less flirted at or with” (GR, 239). The demon of Maxwell and other beasts in the “true forest” of physics and life are avoided (like in Hawthorne), which hints at the “correspondence between the deep conservatism” of the feedback in the rocket’s cybernetic control mechanism “and the kinds of lives” these engineers “were coming to lead” (*ibid.*). As his wife Leni knows, Pökler’s fear of brooding Destiny will eventually drive him to “fly from pain to duty, from joy to work, from commitment to neutrality” (GR, 162). Passive, reliant, and without opinion, the “fear of extinction named Pökler” (GR, 406) refuses to take sides. Hunting, “as a servo valve with a noisy input will, across the Zero,” he is caught “between the two desires, personal identity and impersonal salvation” (*ibid.*). Pynchon’s metaphoric description of Pökler’s position is an ironic rendition of Mann’s “Snow” chapter – if Castorp fails to attain the status of *homo dei* as “lord of [the] counter-positions” recklessness and

⁶⁹³ What comes to mind is Marcuse’s concept of repressive desublimation, and Vanya’s position reminds of the critique of the: “comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom” that “prevails in advanced industrial civilization” (ODM, 3).

⁶⁹⁴ Nietzsche, *Untimely Mediations*, 152.

⁶⁹⁵ Moore, *The Style of Connectedness*, 130.

windy individualism (MM, 496), then so does Pökler. In his attempt to retain a position between both, the latter develops a kind of Spenglerian fatalism, thereby offering his soul and service to his “ally” Death/Weissmann.

Seeing himself faced with the choice “between building what the army wanted—practical hardware—or pushing on in chronic poverty, dreaming of expeditions to Venus” (GR, 400-1), Pökler becomes a “practical man” (GR, 401), developing rocket technology for Weissmann. His factual collaboration, then, is informed by a careful navigation between the “Scylla and Charybdis” (GR, 239) of reality and the closed system of myths and misplaced rationalisations. Not only does Pökler dutifully ignore that his development funds are provided by the Nazis but he also belies the device’s potential as a weapon. Accused by Leni of helping to kill people, the VfR member argues that rocket technology will one day enable man to “transcend” to the moon and create a borderless utopia where “they won’t have to kill” (GR, 400).⁶⁹⁶ Pynchon is explicit as regards such ignorance:

Pökler, the all-seeing [...] must have known that what went on in the VfR committee meetings was the same game as being played in Leni’s violent and shelterless street. [...] And he also knew at first hand what happens to dreams with no money to support them. So, presently Pökler found that by refusing to take side, he’d become Weissmann’s best ally. (GR, 401)

Despite his integration in the military-industrial complex, as it were, Pökler begins to mystify the inhumanity of his work. In the infant days of the project, when “no one was specializing yet”, Pökler glorifies the workgroup as a brotherhood, in which all men throughout the social spectrum, from von Braun to Pökler, are “equally at the Rocket’s mercy” (GR, 402). In conceiving of the construction as work on a democratic basis, he utterly depoliticises hierarchies in the development group and his own function as a cog in the system. Pökler is aware of the politics of the rocket field, knows that “others had the money, others gave the orders”, and willingly fulfils the tasks set by his “ally” Weissmann, who is “sure of Pökler’s role” (GR, 401) and “special destiny” (GR, 431) of designing the *Schwarzgerät*. This is the wager of Fascist Germany described in Mann’s *Doctor Faustus*, the surrender to the promise that the world was “to be renewed” under the “emblem of military socialism”, that

⁶⁹⁶ In his utopia in outer space does not only resonate the dream of liberty of Goethe’s Faust but Spengler’s notion of a soul “intoxicated” by technological hubris: “Man would free himself from the earth, rise to the infinite, leave the bonds of the body” (DW, 2:503).

was by no means completely defined at the time the compact was made (DF, 318). In compromising and playing this game, Pökler enters the trajectory of the rocket's "Folgsamkeitsfaktor" (GR, 403) and renders himself a part of the military machine. As Norbert Wiener writes:

When human atoms are knit into an organization in which they are used, not in their full right as responsible human beings, but as cogs and levers and rods, it matters little that their raw material is flesh and blood. *What is used as an element in a machine, is an element in the machine.*⁶⁹⁷

In his servitude, he is not simply used as an "instrument, as a thing", in Marcuse's terms (ODM, 36), but dismisses his full right as a responsible human being. Pökler goes from Peenemünde to the Mittelwerke in 1944 to oversee the production of raw material for the mass production of the V-2. Immersed in work, he there dwells in isolation, but while he paradoxically "can enjoy a sense of personal identity" in this outer vacuum, "such displaced identity prevents him from connecting" with his environment.⁶⁹⁸ Holding on to this deprived sense of identity, the "fear of extinction called Pökler" (GR, 406) continues to contribute to extinction on a grand scale, using his "gift of Daedalus" to "put as much labyrinth as required between himself and the inconveniences of caring" (GR, 428).⁶⁹⁹ Such lack of "care" comes fully to the fore in his annual meetings with his daughter Ilse at Zwölfkinder. Weissmann arranges these meetings to manage the engineer's discontent and keep him in the game. Trying to save her in brief moments of courage, Pökler goes 'insane' for a little while, thinks of

⁶⁹⁷ Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings*, 185.

⁶⁹⁸ Tabbi, *Postmodern Sublime*, 116.

⁶⁹⁹ Such complex relations between technology and care evoke Heideggerian notions of technological enframing. For instance, Schachterle, following Heidegger, holds that "[t]echnology, with its pursuit of efficiency, sameness, and predictability, robs us of the chance to take a chance, to open up to the nature of Being" ("Pynchon and the Civil Wars of Technology", 269). This holds certainly true for Daedalus figures like Pökler who preclude any form of life by their desperate attempts to evade Maxwell's and other demons. As Tabbi argues, however, these engineers may be enframed by technology but are never absolved of their responsibility (*Postmodern Sublime*, 99). Pökler's self-image completely distorts such relations, and his identification with the rocket is revealing here: "Leni was wrong: no one was using him. Pökler was an extension of the Rocket long before it was ever built. She had seen to that. When she left him, he fell apart" (GR, 402). While the "cause-and-effect-man" (GR, 159) may believe that his loss left a vacuum that needs to be filled with work, with "[t]emperatures, velocities, pressures, fin an body configurations, stabilities and turbulences" (GR, 402), the formulation that this data replaces "what Leni had run away from" (*ibid.*), however, suggests something different. More than convincing parallels to R.D. Laing's *The Divided Self* (1960) contradict his impression of immachination and present Pökler as an ontologically insecure subject experiencing himself as engulfed by the outer world and responding with feelings of alienation (cf. Tabbi, *Postmodern Sublime*, 114). In this sense, Pökler not only enframes himself but belies the use and abuse of his work.

killing Weissmann and seeking asylum in England; but preserving himself “from love he couldn’t really risk” (GR, 408), he returns to the routine of work and continues to meet her in successive annual stills, telling her stories about escaping to the moon—“Should he have told her what the ‘seas’ of the moon really were?” (GR, 410)—while wondering whether she is not better off as a ward of the Reich. If Weissmann coerces Pökler into collaboration, then the latter readily accepts, rationalising the horror underneath the surface of the Oven State: “He’d heard there were camps, but he saw nothing sinister in it: he took the government at their word, ‘re-education’ ... *they have qualified people there... trained personnel*” (*ibid.*). In Adorno’s terms, this Daedalus gift describes both his depersonalised technical perfection and blindness.

It is Ilse who has to break the spell of his “Venusberg” (GR, 430) by pointing out that she is a prisoner. “Close to losing control”, he finally commits an “act of courage” and quits Weissmann’s game (*ibid.*), looking for Ilse in the labour camp Dora that lies only a few hundred meters from the Mittelwerke. The repressed knowledge that his moon fantasies dwell within a system based on the extinction of human lives returns at the single narrative moment in *Gravity’s Rainbow* when the Holocaust unfolds before him.⁷⁰⁰ As the Reich crumbles, and Pökler finally gains access to Dora, the narrator again foregrounds the engineer’s self-deception enabled by his Daedalus gift: “He may have felt that he ought to look, finally. He was not prepared. He did not know. Had the data, yes, but did not know, with senses or heart” (GR, 432). In the “odors of shit, death, sweat, sickness, mildew, piss, the breathing of Dora” (GR, 432), however, he finally has a moment of recognition. Seeing that “all his vacuums, his labyrinths, had been the other side of this [...], this invisible kingdom [...] in the darkness outside” (GR, 432-33) he vomits and cries, but realising that the “walls did not dissolve [...], not from tears [...].” (*ibid.*), he feels obligation, slipping his wedding ring onto the finger of a barely alive woman and finally leaving to wait in the ruins of Zwölfkinder for Ilse. If there is a sense of belatedness, and if Pynchon accordingly refrains from granting the engineer an ‘eleventh-hour salvation’, he nevertheless has him develop a certain “awareness of his involvement with other human beings and a sense of his responsibility” for his previous actions.⁷⁰¹

⁷⁰⁰ See Katalin Orbán, *Ethical Diversions: The Post-Holocaust Narratives of Pynchon, Abish, DeLillo and Spiegelman* (New York/ London: Routledge, 2005), 162-64.

⁷⁰¹ Steven Weisenburger, “The End of History? Thomas Pynchon and the Uses of the Past”, *Twentieth Century Literature* 25, no. 1 (1979): 56.

Chapter 7: Life against Death: Slothrop and the Quest for Redemption

If Weissmann represents a successful transatlantic migration of the culture of death, Slothrop, as Kolbuszewska holds, is a symbol of the whole American post-war generation “betrayed by the corporate America which conspired with the enemy to champion the development of the more and more bureaucratic military-industrial complex”.⁷⁰² A simple fool (cf. GR, 742) stumbling from adventure to adventure in a plot beyond his influence, if there is one, and a disempowered preterite ready to be sacrificed, he seems ill suited to taking part in the race for technological supremacy in the Zone. His role as a pawn in ‘Their’ game, however, is by no means straightforward. Slothrop may be simple, but he is also a “point-for-point microcosm” of this culture (GR, 738),⁷⁰³ and if the suggestion that “[t]echnology only responds” (GR, 521) serves to expose the totalitarian rationale behind Weissmann’s technocratic search for transcendence, then the lieutenant, in whom libidinal responses to technology and a Puritan longing for order merge, is mapped onto the very coordinate system of the Western *libido dominandi*.

As argued, if there is one prominent mythographical reference point to this, then it is neither *Faust* nor Wagner’s *Parsifal* but in many respects Mann’s *Magic Mountain*, whose combination of political allegory and Grail Quest motif Pynchon extends into a farcical quest for salvation. Since Hume, Moore and others have already elucidated the vast scope of Pynchon’s mythography in its relations to socio-political thought (Weber, Arendt, and others), I restrict myself to observing the parallels *Gravity’s Rainbow* draws between Slothrop and the legacy of the Faust myth (Goethe, Mann, Brown), correlating them with the narratives provided by his Puritan background and his ‘Orphic’ dispersal into the texture of the novel. I thereby show how Pynchon uses Slothrop’s quest to expose the most seductive myths of self-empowerment of his own culture. In a complementary analysis I then argue that he also questions the viability of various countercultural narratives of redemption and transcendence, thereby undercutting the proposition that freedom outside the “system” is anything other than mythical.

⁷⁰² Kolbuszewska, *The Poetics of Chronotope*, 141.

⁷⁰³ Like Castorp, he appears as the “legitimate and genuine product of the soil in which he flourished” and “lives not only his personal life [...] but also [...] the life of his epoch and his contemporaries” (MM, 30, 32).

1. Beyond Simple Erection

Genital organization is the tyranny of the genital
—Norman O. Brown, *Love's Body*⁷⁰⁴

The most conspicuous characteristic of Pynchon's pseudo-Bunyan allegorical lieutenant is his 'reflex' of having sexual encounters at locations where V-2 rockets are about to strike. Although the local correlation between the two events is eventually revealed to be accidental, Slothrop's habitual erections at the presence of anything related to military technology, in particular the synthetic polymer Imipolex G, prompt several explanations, the most 'credible' of which is related to his alleged conditioning by the chemist Jamf. Drawing from Pavlovian theories and Brown's concept of genital organisation, Pynchon playfully presents the aetiology of these 'responses' as a tale of a soul that has, in Slothrop's words, been "sold like a side of beef" (GR, 286).⁷⁰⁵ In order to finance his son's education at Harvard, Slothrop's father struck a deal with Jamf, who used the infant for experiments with Imipolex G. Conditioned with the polymer, Slothrop has erections in the presence of any piece of technology that represents death and domination. Slothrop is slave to his penis, a penis, as Brown would suggest, that "is not our own, but daddy's" (LB, 57). Grown up in a world where rebellion against the father has failed, the project of attaining power, at least over oneself, seems impossible. Thus, the lieutenant, in all senses, is a "hyperbolic signifier of the phallic order".⁷⁰⁶ Having internalised the supremacy of the latter, he works analogously with the guidance system of the V-2, serving as a tool of the military and economic elite.⁷⁰⁷ His "perfect mechanism" (GR, 48), instilled by

⁷⁰⁴ Brown, *Love's Body*, 127.

⁷⁰⁵ In *Life Against Death*, Brown introduces his dichotomy of *genital organisation* and *polymorphous perversity* as representative of two life principles. While "polymorphous perversity" represents a "distribution of libido in a life not at war with death", genital organisation represents the ego's pursuit of self-preservation: "sexual organizations, pregenital as well as genital, appear to be constructed by anxiety, by the flight from death and the wish to die" (LD, 116), which relates this "body politic" (LB, 126) to the Apollonian (read Faustian) flight from death that creates death, the project of violently altering nature. As Brown quotes Bruno Bettelheim: "Only with phallic psychology did aggressive manipulation of nature by technological inventions become possible" (LD, 280). Slothrop, as Wolfley points out, "bears the full curse of genital organization" ("Repression's Rainbow", 883).

⁷⁰⁶ Hite, "Fun Actually Was", 698. The anti-oedipal world of *Gravity's Rainbow* is indeed one in which fathers not merely dominate but also sacrifice their sons: "The true king only dies a mock death. Remember. Any number of young men may be selected to die in his place" (GR, 131; cf. LD, 118).

⁷⁰⁷ As Marcuse writes: "Repression is a historical phenomenon. The effective subjugation of the instincts to repressive controls is imposed not by nature but by man. The primal father, as the archetype of domination, initiates the chain reaction of enslavement, rebellion, and reinforced domination which marks the history of civilization. But ever since the first, prehistoric restoration of domination following the first rebellion, repression from without has been supported by repression from within: the unfree individual introjects his masters and their commands into his own mental apparatus. The

the country that has sent him to war, also has a distinctly totalitarian touch. As Hannah Arendt writes:

Men insofar as they are more than animal reaction and fulfilment of function are entirely superfluous to totalitarian regimes. Totalitarianism strives not toward despotic rule over men, but toward a system in which men are superfluous.⁷⁰⁸

Such a reaction is ruthlessly exploited by the “Firm”, especially by the Pavlovian behaviourist Ned Pointsman.⁷⁰⁹ The latter wants to fulfil his “brown realpolitik dreams” and find in Tyrone the “ideal” of “the true mechanical explanation’ (GR, 89), a universal scientific principle that is to serve him as a means of imposing control: “When we find it, we’ll have shown again the stone determinacy of everything, of every soul” (GR, 89). As much of a victim as Slothrop seems to be, however, the facticity of his conditioning with Imipolex G might merely be “Bull Shit” (GR, 286). Not only does he turn out to be a “thermodynamic surprise” (GR, 143), invalidating the perfect correlation sought after by Pointsman and Mexico;⁷¹⁰ his white Anglo-Saxon, male, racist, and sexist mindset also suggests that the “Penis He Thought Was His Own” (GR, 216) is at least partly “his, own” (GR, 217).⁷¹¹ His conditioning is

struggle against freedom reproduces itself in the psyche of man, as the self-repression of the repressed individual, and his self-repression in turn sustains his masters and their institutions” (EC, 16).

⁷⁰⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 457.

⁷⁰⁹ Slothrop is assigned to the SOE, or “Firm”, Pynchon’s take on the British Special Operations Executive. Paul Fussell provides an excellent contextualisation and reading of this institution. The real SOE, more an “eccentric club” than a formally military executive, performed espionage and sabotage during the Second World War, from producing exploding pencils to, allegedly, “casting spells on the German civil and military hierarchy”. Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York/London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 328. In *Gravity’s Rainbow* the SOE appears comically refracted as a bunch of “lunatics, [...] spiritualists, vaudeville entertainers, wireless technicians, Couéists, Ouspenskians, Skinnerites, lobotomy enthusiasts, Dale Carnegie zealots” (GR, 77), who synthesise science with religion, occultism, Schrödingers psi-function, and folklore “to get at the German soul from whatever came to hand” (GR, 74). Pointsman, part of the institution, makes his first appearance in *Gravity’s Rainbow* (GR, 42) in association with a black dog, which may be an ironic allusion to Mephistopheles. As much as Gaddis’s Basil Valentine, he is a sterile, ‘anal’ character, who dwells in an ivory tower, dreaming of winning the Nobel Prize (GR, 142) by finding the ultimate mechanical explanation for everything. His mechanistic approach, however, also becomes his nemesis. Faced with the impracticality of his theories as regards the “thermodynamic surprise” (GR, 143) embodied in Slothrop, whom he considers “psychologically, historically, a monster” (GR, 144), the mechanics of his own psyche eventually cracks up in schizophrenia.

⁷¹⁰ As Brian McHale points out, “we later learn from Slothrop himself that at least some of these conquests were simply erotic fantasies”. Brian MacHale, “Modernist Reading, Post-Modern Text: The Case of *Gravity’s Rainbow*”, *Poetics Today* 1, no. 1-2 (1979): 94.

⁷¹¹ The account of his conditioning, mainly reconstructed from cryptic dossiers with an enormous amount of inference, has to be taken cum *grano salis*, for however suitable Slothrop’s theory about the sale of “T.S.” (Tyrone Slothrop, also called “Schwarzknabe”) by “B.S.” (Broderick, or Blackfather

thereby by no means reduced to puns on Freudian theories but is embedded in further reaching criticism. The lieutenant's "Schwarzphänomen" (GR, 513), as one character calls it, these "sub-Slothrop needs They know about, and he doesn't" (GR, 490) that prompt him to detect destructive technology, go hand in hand with his second most notable characteristic. Slothrop, like Gaddis's Wyatt, is a product of Puritanism, and as critical towards the religious foundations of his country as Gaddis, Pynchon uses this circumstance to satirise its authoritarian and capitalist traits. Interspersing Slothrop's progress with several 'flashbacks' to the lieutenant's family history, *Gravity's Rainbow* expounds if not a strict genealogy, then at least, to paraphrase Marcuse, a 'hidden trend' at the basis of his own culture that is as Faustian as that of the Oven State.

2. Work Ethic and Authoritarianism – Puritans, Pigs, and Paper

[C]ivilization has progressed as organized *domination*.
—Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*⁷¹²

It has often been pointed out that Pynchon portrays institutionalised religion as the theocratic twin of totalitarianism,⁷¹³ be it in his mockery of Catholic communities in *V.* or more explicitly in *Mason & Dixon's* proto-Fascist Jesuits, like Father Zarpazo, "Lord of the Zero", whose love of technology and the beauty of absolutes puts them in the same circle as the Lady V and Blicero.⁷¹⁴ In *Gravity's Rainbow* the decidedly anti-Puritan tenor is focused on two specific soteriological themes, the authoritarian spirit emergent in the dialectic between election and preterition and the regime of accumulation emergent in the Protestant work ethic.⁷¹⁵

Pynchon intersperses his narration with several accounts of Slothrop's New England roots that operate in the spirit of both these mechanisms. In a vignette about the first 'transatlantic' Slothrop, William, Pynchon immediately points to the social

Slothrop) to Jamf at Harvard may appear, however, Pynchon, with a "[c]lever sense of humor", does never exclude the possibility that such musings themselves are "Bull Shit" (GR, 286).

⁷¹² Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 34.

⁷¹³ See, for instance, Chambers, *Thomas Pynchon*, 69.

⁷¹⁴ Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon*, 544; see also Julie Christine Sears, "Black and White Rainbows and Blurry Lines: Sexual Deviance/Diversity in *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon*" in *Thomas Pynchon: Reading from the Margins*, ed. Niran Abbas (Madison/Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press: 2003), 115-116; Cowart, *Thomas Pynchon and the Dark Passages of History*, 143.

⁷¹⁵ This suggestion, as Eddins has pointed out, relates to Voegelin's (*The Gnostic Pynchon*, 130).

corruption of theological doctrines among the Puritan settlers in America.⁷¹⁶ Already on board the *Arabella*, where William works as a “mess cook or something” some of the saints appear “more elect” (GR, 204) than others. The binary theological distinction between elect and reprobate has already been transformed into a secular classification that allows for graduation.⁷¹⁷ The overall social organisation of the early days in Boston, this “Winthrop machine” (GR, 555), then, is nothing but a mechanism of repression. Just after settling in Berkshire, William starts a “pig operation” (*ibid.*), transporting pigs to a Boston slaughterhouse. Pondering on their “nobility and personal freedom”, their natural “grace”, he comes to love these animals, who, “possessed by [...] trust for men, which the men kept betraying”, rush “into extinction like lemmings” (*ibid.*). Being a good puritan, he takes this “squealing bloody horror” as “a parable” that presents Boston as an omnivorous mechanism feeding on the happiness of the preterite. As William’s ‘ghost’ explains to Slothrop, Jesus “saw it from the lemming point of view. Without the millions who had plunged and drowned, there could have been no miracle” (GR, 554).

As if it were not suggestive enough that William’s version of the covenant, in which salvation is based on the extinction of millions, can be read alongside Blicero’s conjectures on the thousands of soldiers burned by the “Reich’s flame” for the sake of the “royal moths” of the German Oven State (GR, 98), Pynchon draws further parallels between Puritanism and totalitarianism in a cognate account of Katje’s ancestor Frans van der Groov. Frans, a seventeenth century “crazy Dutchman”, spends thirteen years on Mauritius systematically killing dodos (GR, 109). Overcome by loneliness after some time, he joins some Puritan settlers. The latter appear to him as “[l]osers, impersonating a race chosen by God” (GR, 110), killing the birds in a mood of “universal hysteria” (GR, 109). Yet they are driven by a spirit that renders each killing a devotional, if not necessary act. Considering “the stumbling birds ill-made to the point of Satanic intervention, so ugly as to embody argument against Godly creation”, they hold that the dodos must be eradicated, lest Christians should perish (GR, 110). Pynchon insinuates here a fatal self-apotheosis inherent in early

⁷¹⁶ William, as has been often pointed out, is modelled after Pynchon’s own dissident ancestor. See, for instance, Deborah L. Madsen, “Family Legacies: Identifying the Traces of William Pynchon in *Gravity’s Rainbow*”, *Pynchon Notes* 42-43 (1998): 29-48.

⁷¹⁷ Moore, *The Style of Connectedness*, 130. George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945) resonates in this phrase and in the following pig allegory.

English Puritans' belief that they were God's chosen people. The latter, according to Zafirovski,

is a likely source as well as a putative sanctification of the Puritan "ethnic mistrust" and consequent subjection, persecution, and extermination or "ethnic cleansing" ("salvation") of other, "ungodly" or "damned" foreign peoples, cultures and religions.⁷¹⁸

The adventurer Frans suspects that the settlers merely sanctify "genocide" (GR, 545) but, since "God could not be that cruel" (GR, 111), engages in a wilful suspension of disbelief, a dream vision of a miraculous conversion of the dodos in order to maintain this perverse theodicy. In the end, however, only the "steel reality of the firearm" (*ibid.*) prevails, irrespective of whether the killings were a matter of election.⁷¹⁹

If Frans sanctions the genocide by devising a consoling fiction, William, as Shawn Smith argues, also betrays a certain willingness to comply when he is waiting "for that one pig that wouldn't die" (GR, 555) while facilitating the "squealing bloody horror".⁷²⁰ Eventually grown tired of the Winthrop machine, however, he comes to challenge the hegemony and writes his tract *On Preterition*, printed in England and

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 that the Elect in Boston were pissed off about that. (*Ibid.*)

William's (and William Pynchon's) argument that "election emerges dialectically from preterition, and for the sake of it" is considered heretical.⁷²¹ Even more so, it is furthered by his plea to see in Judas Iscariot the saint of the preterite. His thought may ultimately be flawed since it retains the schism, but William's heresy raises a crucial question: "Could he [William] have been the fork in the road America never took, the singular point she jumped the wrong way from? [...] Might there have been fewer

⁷¹⁸ Zafirovski, *The Protestant Ethic*, 74.

⁷¹⁹ Frans presents the distinction between saintly and satanic as hinging on the ability to speak and thus comprehend His word. A similar feat of demonization, as it were, can be found in Gaddis's *Carpenter's Gothic* (1985), in which biblical literalism plays into totalitarian discourse; cf. Mathieu Duply, "Fields Ripe for Harvest: *Carpenter's Gothic*, Africa, and Avatars of Biopolitical Control", in *William Gaddis, 'The Last of Something': Critical Essays*, ed. Crystal Alberts et al. (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2010), 146-49.

⁷²⁰ Smith, *Pynchon and History*, 86.

⁷²¹ *Ibid.*, 136.

crimes in the name of Jesus, and more mercy in the name of Judas Iscariot?” (GR, 556). Like his descendant Tyrone later, William is presented as a crossroads, a potential historical tipping point.⁷²²

The majority of his descendants, however, abandoned William’s countercultural model and sold out to the American Dream. *Gravity’s Rainbow* captures their subscription to the soteriological economy of the Winthrop machine in a panning shot over a congregational churchyard in Massachusetts, where the ancestry of Slothrop appears condensed in epitaphs. The first one in sight contains the lines: “‘Death is a debt to nature due./ Which I have paid and so must you” (GR, 26).⁷²³ Pynchon, writing in the spirit of Spengler, Weber, and Brown, satirises the Puritan violation of this natural ‘economy’ of death and (possible) rebirth described in this epitaph. In Puritanism, to briefly recapitulate Weber’s well-known hypothesis, the accumulation of good works is a means of getting rid of the fear of damnation. In a secularised context, their nature assumed a purely economic character that eventually became identified with life itself: time is money, and the more the better. Tyrone’s family surrenders to this regime of accumulation,

[e]ach one in turn paying his debt to nature due and leaving the excess to the next link in the name’s chain. [...] The money seeping its way out through stock portfolios more intricate than any genealogy: what stayed at home in Berkshire went into timberland whose diminishing green reaches were converted acres at a clip into paper—toilet paper, banknote stock, newsprint—a medium or ground for shit, money, and the Word. [...] Shit, money, and the Word, the three American truths, powering the American mobility, claimed the Slothrops, clasped them for good to the country’s fate. (GR, 27-28)⁷²⁴

Having long deviated from the religious impetus of vouchsafing an individual *certitudo salutis*, the accumulation of money, and the handing over of economic surplus has turned into a matter of extending life, and economic power.⁷²⁵ However,

⁷²² See Pöhlmann, *Pynchon’s Postnational Imagination*, 170.

⁷²³ Pynchon quotes Emily Dickinson in this context, but this particular inscription appears to be taken from real New England tombstones that inspired her as well; cf. Elizabeth A. Petrino, *Emily Dickinson and Her Contemporaries: Women’s Verse in America, 1820-1885* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1998), 108.

⁷²⁴ Doug Haynes provides an excellent analysis of the Slothrop genealogy in relation to entropy and Marx’s hypothesis of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. Doug Haynes, “‘Gravity Rushes through Him’: Folk and Fetish in Pynchon’s Rilke” *Modern Fictions Studies* (forthcoming).

⁷²⁵ Spengler argues: Economic activity is never found in a religion or a philosophy, always only in the political organism of a church or the social organism of a theorizing fellowship; it is ever a compromise with ‘this world’ and an index of the presence of a will-to-power (DW, 2:473). Similarly,

in describing the material process underlying the production of power, of “mobility”, Pynchon mocks an industry as insanely lethal as the German petro-chemical cartel:⁷²⁶

Slothrop’s family actually made its money killing trees, amputating them from their roots, chopping them up, grinding them to pulp, bleaching that to paper and getting paid for this with more paper (GR, 553)

Being paid for paper with paper, the Slothrop business does not merely exemplify how paper money “distort[s] our ‘natural’ understanding of the relationship between symbols and things”.⁷²⁷ As raw material for “toilet paper, banknote stock, newsprint” is put to practical application for “[s]hit, money, and the Word, the three American truths, powering the American mobility” (GR, 28), the medium paper points to the faecal quality, the “absolute worthlessness” (LD, 254) of the latter.⁷²⁸ The excremental tenor of this section invariably evokes Brown’s reading of secular economies as a Faustian surrender to the devil,⁷²⁹ but also on a much more concrete level this very transformation of life and soil into fortune, is nothing but the work of Spengler’s Faustian man. While the mobilising quality of money, a mere category of thought, is based on the very delusion offered by a Mephistopheles, its production generates a “necropolis” (GR, 27). However strong their faith, the Slothrops lost their wager and do not share their country’s prosperous fate but merely “persist” (GR, 28) throughout a long line of decline:

The profits slackening, the family ever multiplying. Interest from various numbered trusts was still turned, by family banks down in Boston every second or third generation, back into yet another trust, in long rallentando, in infinite series just perceptibly, term by term, dying... but never quite to the zero... (*ibid.*)

Brown holds: the “ultimate category of economics is power; but power is not an economic category” (LD, 251).

⁷²⁶ With money as a medium, Spengler argues “the old *possession*, bound up with life and the soil, gives way to *fortune*, which is essentially mobile” (DW, 2:483).

⁷²⁷ Shell, *Money, Language, Thought*, 7.

⁷²⁸ In an earlier account on the manipulation of German stock markets by the ominous Weimar Republic rogue Hugo Stinnes by means of vast amounts of emergency money produced by a “certain Massachusetts paper mill” and contracted by the Slothrop Paper Company (GR, 285), Pynchon crudely draws the reader’s attention to the consequences of such money-magic dispelled: “[t]hose were the days when you carried marks around in wheelbarrows to your daily shopping and used them for toilet paper, assuming you had anything to shit” (GR, 248).

⁷²⁹ As Brown associates money, which is at the “heart of the [...] accumulation complex” (LD, 281), with excrement (LD, 254, 279) and accumulation with phallic aggression (LD, 280), however, the economic endeavour is in the last instance nothing but a surrender to the “Devil and to death” (LD, 223).

Hanging “at the bottom of his blood’s avalanche” (*ibid.*), Slothrop, the “[l]ast of the line, and how far-fallen” (GR, 569), is among the preterite, in religious and economic terms.⁷³⁰ Despite having been granted an education at Harvard, aimed at initiating him into the ranks of the powerful and presumably also “into the Puritan Mysteries” (GR, 267-68), he appears disfavoured, fallen through the system, in the diegetic present of *Gravity’s Rainbow*.⁷³¹ Providence frequently gives him “the finger” (GR, 461), and his paranoia is not ruled by a divine Word but the fear of a “rocket with his name written on it” (GR, 25). Yet, although “no other Slothrop ever felt so much fear in the presence of Commerce” (GR, 569), he shares with his ancestors a “love for the Word” (GR, 207) and is especially alert to trees (GR, 522) and various economies of paper and excrement (GR, 571).⁷³² As much as his penis responds in advance to the devices Slothrop fears most, his “Puritan reflex of seeking orders behind the visible, also known as paranoia” (GR, 188) will paradoxically lead him along the underground nodes of commerce, the black markets of post-war Germany.⁷³³ Given the obsessiveness with which he will come to trace these hidden orders, it is no wonder that some critics, specifically Cowart, Hume, and Grim, have compared Slothrop with Goethe’s Faust. Like Faust, he is financially and intellectually bankrupt, almost proud

⁷³⁰ Rather than using the common designation ‘reprobate’, Pynchon opposes the elect with a subcategory of the ‘damned’. Mackey gives a concise delineation of the latter: “The first discrimination in the divine decrees is between Elect and Reprobate. But some writers subdivide the Reprobate. There are the Reprobate [...], whom God designates for damnation. And there are the Preterite, whom he passes over and does not sign either for salvation or perdition, but who are of course damned anyway by the inertia of sin. All men are drowning. A few of them God mercifully plucks out of the water and revives. Some are pushed down and held under. The rest are allowed to sink on their own”. Louis Mackey, “Paranoia, Pynchon, and Preterition”, *SubStance* 10, no. 1 (1981): 18.

⁷³¹ Eddins gives a concise analysis of Pynchon’s satiric take on this ‘secret’ arch of power at Harvard. As mentioned, in the historical flashbacks, the Puritan *libido dominandi* becomes the motivation of scriptural practice aimed at delimiting interpretations of reality and rewriting social hierarchical relations. Eddins sees this process reiterated by the Harvard elite’s *Wille zur Macht* that presses the Word in its service (*The Gnostic Pynchon*, 132). But as much as the Mauritian settlers and the New England entrepreneurs operate with an essentially vacuous principle, so do the Harvard boys elevate “to the status of spiritual center” (*ibid.*) a void, “*Vanitas*, Emptiness” (GR, 267). See in this context also Gaddis’s comments on the Ivy League and the Skull and Bones society in *The Recognitions* (TR, 734).

⁷³² Slothrop’s obsession with everything anal and excremental is most spectacularly established in his drug-induced nightmare about an ‘Orphic descent’ into a toilet in the Roseland ballroom, where he escapes anal rape by the “Negro” Malcolm X and reads “patterns thick with meaning” (GR, 65) in crusted faeces. A similar image complex (death-wish, phallic aggression, and excremental economy) underlies the technical device, the S-Gerät, he later traces in the Zone. The hint to the device gained from rocket blueprints found in a toilet, the Gerät itself made of Imipolex G, it invariably attracts Slothrop (cf. “*What do I need that badly?*”: GR, 490). Eventually, also his relationship with the child Bianca (“the white one”) circulates around similar allusions; cf. Duyfhuizen, ““A Suspension””, § 22.

⁷³³ Entering the Zone, Slothrop “feels his own” belief “stronger now as borders fall away and the Zone envelops him, his own WASPs in buckled black, who heard God clamoring to them in every turn of a leaf” (GR, 281).

to be damned, and willing to accept this damnation for the sake of attaining some ever-elusive knowledge. It is noticeable that Slothrop is by no means a hubristic transgressor forfeiting his immortal part.⁷³⁴ On the contrary: as much as Weissmann, a reckless individual, is directed by an infinite thirst for guilt, Slothrop is haunted by his ancestors' 'phylogenetic curse' of collective guilt, a Puritan albatross around his neck.⁷³⁵ This 'curse', however, is of an ambivalent nature, for Slothrop quite clearly validates Thanatz's sado-anarchist argument that the structure of the 'System' needs not only our lust for dominance so that it can co-opt us but also "our submission so that it may remain in power" (GR, 737). As Sascha Pöhlmann argues, the "will to power is here also the will to be overpowered, liberated from the obligation to act, finding comfort in narratives [and practices] offered by sovereignty".⁷³⁶ It is this inability to abandon the coordinates of his New England origins and to accept responsibility with which he eventually forfeits not his 'soul' but any means of formulating one of his own. Unable to rid himself from the internalised polarity between elect and preterite, and unable to operate outside the soteriological regime of accumulation, he deludes himself into thinking that his search for military technology is a search for a Holy Grail with which to replenish both inner and outer wasteland. Yet the object he craves has neither much in common with the sacred object of the classical legends described in Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* (1920) nor with Hans Castorp's vision of the 'purest' and 'highest'.

⁷³⁴ Cowart argues that Slothrop's insatiable search for knowledge leads "to the peril of his 'personal destiny' [...], if not his soul" (*The Art of Allusion*, 129).

⁷³⁵ In Brown's psycho-historical account, the "sense of guilt in the human species", caused by the killing of the primal father, "causes the nightmare of history", the progressive development of civilization, and "the compensatory rituals of cyclical regeneration and messianic redemption" (LD, 277), by which this guilt is to be expiated. Tracing archaic types of economies against the background of Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Brown posits that the "money complex is constructed out of an unconscious sense of guilt" (LD, 270). While economies embedded in religion are limited, as the divinity promises a removal of indebtedness and guilt via redemption, the increased sense of guilt in the modern consciousness brings about the emancipation of economic processes from divine ends (according to Brown, drawing from Freud, guilt increases with civilization work, that is, the accumulation of historical correlates with that of guilt). With secularisation the illusion that work achieves redemption is abandoned, while at the same time the "compulsion to work is retained and intensified" (LD, 272), resulting in "an economy driven by the pure sense of guilt, unmitigated by any sense of redemption" (*ibid.*). Money and its accumulation becomes a "substitute for the religious complex, an attempt to find God in things" (LD, 240), and "the process of producing an ever expanding surplus" (LD, 261) becomes an end in itself that "makes man eternally Faustian and restless" (LD, 259). Being is sacrificed for the sake of limitless accumulation, which eventually precludes any possibility of an "economy of abundance" (*ibid.*). For Brown this Faustian trait is not a matter of individual choice. As in modernity guilt has increased to a point where the safety valve mechanisms of redemption have become irrelevant, he argues, guilt has accumulated to a degree that it "imposes on modern societies a historical 'destiny'", by which the sins of the fathers are visited upon the following generations (LD, 278).

⁷³⁶ Pöhlmann, *Pynchon's Postnational Imagination*, 302.

3. Grail Quest

Equipped with an assortment of disguises and this twofold ‘gift’ of paranoia and erectile response, Slothrop is sent first to a basic education programme in rocket technology in the French Riviera and then to the Zone. It is as soon as he sets out to find the rocket that Pynchon associates him with the scholar part of the Faust myth. The lieutenant’s thirst for knowledge, his *curiositas*, comes fully to the fore during his training. Reading all the material available about the device, his knowledge is at the pinnacle of the time,⁷³⁷ but by succumbing to the promise of Rocket technology and getting erections after his perusal of handbooks full of runic symbols, his *curiositas* becomes insatiable: “He goes around assuming they’ve assigned him a limitless Need To Know” (GR, 243). Slothrop discovers in this “pornography of blueprints” (GR, 224) a hint about a mysterious *S-Gerät* (GR, 252), presumably made of Jamf’s Imipolex G and used in Weissmann’s Rocket 00000. Intuiting a connection between the synthetic, the device, and his erectile responses, Slothrop’s makes it his mission to find it. His Puritan progress here converges with the Faustian tale.

Just having entered the Zone, Slothrop meets Geli Tripping, an “apprentice witch” (GR, 329), who “posed once for a rocket insignia” (GR, 293), lover of Slothrop’s Soviet counterpart, the intelligence officer and “rocket maniac” Tchitcherine (GR, 290). She, as one learns toward the end of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, effectuates one of the few instances of real ‘magic’ in the novel (GR, 735), an act of love that will allow Tchitcherine to let go of the “personal doom he carries with him” (GR, 566). While such miracles are reserved for her partner, she nevertheless opens to Slothrop the vista to an alternative to his quest. He receives a twofold message from Geli, a hint to the *S-Gerät* but also the assertion that the Zone, not yet split into zones of occupation, constitutes an interregnum of possibilities, in which frontiers and subdivisions do not count: “Its all been suspended” (GR, 294). The witch demonstrates her claim with a spectacular act of love on top of a Harz mountain. The scenery on the Brocken evokes the Nordic Walpurgis Night featured in the first part of *Faust*.⁷³⁸ “However, the historical dimension by far overshadows the mythical here:

⁷³⁷ See Cowart, *The Art of Allusion*, 129.

⁷³⁸ There, a grotesque-carnavalesque witches Sabbath, an extraordinarily saucy “sensual orgy” (Luke, “Introduction”, *Faust: Part One*, xxxix) provides Faust with a ‘vulgar’ diversion from his misadventures with Margareta but also served Goethe as a pretext to satirise many of his contemporaries. In Mann, a carnival celebration in the chapter “Walpurgis-Night”, in which Castorp

Though May Day Eve's come and gone and this frolicking twosome are nearly a month late, relics of the latest Black Sabbath still remain: Kriegsbier empties, lace undergarments, spent rifle cartridges, Swastika-banners of ripped red satin, tattooing-needles and splashes of blue ink [...] (GR, 329)

Geli shows Slothrop the Brocken spectre. Amongst the relics of the last 'official' Nazi ceremony,⁷³⁹ held at the night of Hitler's suicide, they have sex at the break of dawn, casting giant shadows over the land, not ordinary shadows but "*three-dimensional*" (GR, 330) ones, with spectra at all their edges. Their act can be read as an attempt to re-appropriate and re-enchant the "plexus of German evil" (GR, 329) on which Nazi transmitters still tower while the area is already occupied by American and Soviet troops. Confined to "dawns slender interface", the "Brockengespenstphänomen" (GR, 331) symbolises the brief period of openness in the German post-war parenthesis. The question here is not about restoring origins, for as romantic as their unification appears, and as magically as their shadows spread over the land, under "the clouds out there it's all as still, and lost, as Atlantis" (*ibid.*). It is a question of what to do at the slender interface, how to retain possibilities rather than petrifying choice. As the Argentine anarchist Squalidozzi explains: "In the openness of the German Zone, our hope is limitless. [...] So is our danger" (GR, 315). The 'pedagogical' import of Geli's act for Slothrop, who "is as properly constituted a state as any other in the Zone these days" (GR, 291), is to attain an alternative view to the closed circuit of his mythical/Puritan quest. Immersed in the *Brockengespenst*, Slothrop casts his own 'fuck you' spell, raising "his middle finger to the west, the headlong finger darkening three miles of cloud per second" (GR, 330). The gesture, however, is soon forgotten.

Slothrop visits Raketen-Stadt, the Mittelwerke in Nordhausen, a war construction built "To Avoid Symmetry, Allow Complexity, Introduce Terror" (GR, 297). His descent to the tunnels, as much a crude pun on the Oedipal return to the womb of the mother as to Faust's descent to the Mothers, turns out to be a failure.⁷⁴⁰ There, Slothrop does not unveil a creative principle but only the "miasma of evil in Stollen 41" (GR, 305), the place in the Mittelwerke where the assembled V-2 were tested

finally confesses his love to his Chauchat, similarly constitutes a mixture of frivolity and exposure of the grotesquery of the social microcosm on the mountain.

⁷³⁹ The Nazis, as Grim points out, established the Walpurgisnacht as an official ceremony at the beginning of their regime (*The Faust Legend*, 2:80).

⁷⁴⁰ See Grim, *The Faust Legend*, 2:78. In Goethe, Faust descends to the realm of the 'Mothers', a subterranean region associated with the creative principle, to recover Helena and Paris, the ideals of classical beauty.

before being delivered to the launching batteries. He meets U.S. Army Ordnance Major Duane Marvy and his team of “Mothers”, the “meanest-ass technical intelligence team” (GR, 287). Cooperating with “some Project Hermes people from General Electrics” (*ibid.*, cf. 307, 565), the Mothers scavenge rocket parts and construction plans to ship them across the Atlantic. As Marvy asserts later: “there’s a great future in these V-weapons” (GR, 558). Denied (Oedipal) unification with the Mothers and chased by Marvy, Slothrop flees to Berlin where he takes on his next persona, the mock-hero figure Rocketman, transformed by the underworld figure Säure Bummer’s “*act of naming*” (GR, 366). A crude mixture of hyperbolic GI and comic hero, he appears as an inheritor of Western culture, as Hume observes.⁷⁴¹ As such, however, he is not merely a harbinger of chewing gum and “American enlightenment” (GR, 359) as he himself would have it. Dressed in Wagnerian opera rags and a Siegfried helmet that, without horns, “would just look like the nose assembly of the Rocket” (GR, 366), Rocketman, a technocrat posing as a Wagnerian knight, is also associated with von Braun’s nickname ‘missile man’. Slothrop’s pose as Wagnerian hero is more than superficial mockery. Pre-empted by National Socialist appropriations of Wagnerian art-myth, it follows the same principles mystifying political and military interests.⁷⁴² Slothrop’s strongest delusion is that he comes to think of the S-Gerät as a kind of Holy Grail (GR, 275). Yet as Thomas rightly notes, the “whole business of questing [...] looks like an unlikely and unstable basis for some so-called political fiction” but should rather be understood as “a gloss on the grand narratives of domination”.⁷⁴³

With this mythical gloss framing Slothrop’s actual task Pynchon not merely brilliantly connects the lieutenant’s story with that of Hans Castorp, but also provides a satirical parable of the political situation of the summer of 1945 that exposes the discrepancy between the tarnish of soteriological myth and the real outcome of the interregnum of possibilities in the Zone. In the traditional legends the cornucopian grail, as Marc Shell explains, symbolised an “extraordinary gift both infinitely large and free, which was said to be able to lift men out of the ordinary world of exchange into a world in which freedom and totality were possible”.⁷⁴⁴ At a first glance,

⁷⁴¹ Hume, *Pynchon’s Mythography*, 96.

⁷⁴² Kuberski points out that “one of the antiaircraft rockets the Nazis were testing at the moment of their surrender was called the “Rheintochter” (“Gravity’s Angel”, 144).

⁷⁴³ Thomas, *Pynchon and the Political*, 73.

⁷⁴⁴ Shell, *Money, Language, Thought*, 24-25.

Slothrop's quest would suggest the pursuit of such a gift, both an attempt to replenish the 'wasteland' of the Zone and to rid himself of his Puritan legacy, the albatross around his neck, and restore, in Brown's terms, Being outside the temporal schema of history as accumulated guilt. If Slothrop's legendary conditioning by Jamf may be merely distraction, however, so are the mythical promises of his Grail hunt, especially if one takes into consideration that Slothrop's Perceval pose is, like his Rocketman persona, pre-empted by Nazi mythography.⁷⁴⁵ In the last instance, the S-Gerät remains, despite all its symbolical implications, a piece of military hardware available on the (black) market and its pursuit a metonymy of the Western race for military and economic supremacy. Even Slothrop's "dumb idling heart" (GR, 364) loses its naivety in this respect. Uncomfortable with the mythological roles pressed onto him, he comes to realise that he is not suited for playing the redeemer. He feels "burdened" in his Rocketman "turnout" (GR, 458, cf. 379), the rocket-nose helmet imposing such a weight onto him that it is occasionally "pulling him straight down" (GR, 460). In the same vein, he has tremendous difficulties to live up to the role of the "Swine-hero" Plechazunga he is urged to play later, eventually fleeing from the scene, rescued by a girl, who "[p]rovidentially" shows up (GR, 571). Slothrop knows that he is not a knightly hero, that he has embarked "on somebody else's voyage" (GR, 364). Yet he also realises that what he pursues is no means of redemption: "The Schwarzgerät is no Grail, Ace, that's not what the G in Imipolex G stands for" (*ibid.*). He also knows that he is used as a pawn in an "evil game" of scavenging military intelligence while the 'wasteland' of the Zone is in bitter need of aid. Aware that any notion of salvation in this context is mockery, he immediately assumes the opposite extreme, the position of the preterite, comparing himself with Tannhäuser, the "Singing Nincompoop" under the spell of Lady Venus in a "sucking marshland of sin" (*ibid.*). The function of myth here converges with that of Puritanism and paranoia, a closed system that precludes any interaction deviating from the plot, that negates any investment outside its economy, and eventually displaces all basic human obligations towards an imaginary higher power.⁷⁴⁶ But despite all renunciations of agency, he eventually admits to

⁷⁴⁵ As Bruno Arich-Gerz and Luc Herman point out, Heinrich Himmler "elaborated an occultist scheme streamlining the Teutonic legend of Percival for the so-called aryosophic ideology of Nazism. He founded the "Schwarzer Orden", the black Order of the SS, and sent it on expeditions to foreign countries [...] in pursuit of the Grail". Bruno Arich-Gerz and Luc Herman, "Encountering the Other at Home: Representations of Dora in Pynchon and Mirbach", *Pynchon Notes* 54-55 (2008): 131-32.

⁷⁴⁶ John Farrell has excellently documented the intersection between Puritan ideas of covenant and the delusions of paranoia. Paranoia empties the world of contingency and accident, it is anti-mimetic in

himself: “you know that in some irreducible way it’s an evil game. You play because you have nothing better to do, but that doesn’t make it right” (*ibid.*). This realisation renders Pynchon’s World War II-cum-Vietnam allegory a dire comment on the facilitators of American military intervention. Unlike his ancestor William, Tyrone has learned to think outside the system. Remembering the “fork in the road”, constituted by the latter’s heresy, he muses:

maybe for a little while all the fences are down, one road as good as another, the whole Zone cleared, [...] and somewhere inside the waste of it a single set of coordinates from which to proceed, without elect, without preterite [...] (GR, 556)

As Pöhlmann writes, the Zone allows such a moment “since it lacks repressive unifying ideology”.⁷⁴⁷ In an environment of constantly changing alliances, Tyrone has the chance to determine his actions, to choose an ideology, like Katje does when she quits Blicero’s “game for good” (GR, 104). But even though his own game has ceased to be fun for him, he decides to follow his “historical destiny” (LD, 278), conforming to the narrative of the soteriological plot.⁷⁴⁸ He knows that such paranoia is nothing but an exercise in devising “perfect methods of immobility” (GR, 572) and clearly realises that not one plot leads to liberation but many ways, that navigating a complicated system “may yet carry him to freedom” (GR, 603).⁷⁴⁹ However, he is unable to let go and continues, to quote the spokesman of the Counterforce, as “schizoid, as double-minded [...] as any of the rest of us” (GR, 712).

that it puts meaning and value in place of the world, and it establishes a relation between what one takes for the world and oneself. The by-products of such a distorted relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence are commonly delusions of grandeur and a decreased sense of responsibility, as paranoia displaces human agency and obligations toward an imaginary higher power, relieving the subject from the “burden of responsibility” (*Paranoia and Modernity*, 309-10); cf. David Trotter, *Paranoid Modernism: Literary Experiment, Psychosis, and the Professionalization of English Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 58-59.

⁷⁴⁷ Pöhlmann, *Pynchon’s Postnational Imagination*, 175; cf. GR, 177.

⁷⁴⁸ At one point, for instance, he crosses paths with Ludwig, a boy in search of his pet lemming. What Ludwig experiences in his search is a “fate worse than death” (GR, 729). Rather than helping the boy, however, Slothrop makes a pious wish on an evening star: “Let that Ludwig find his lemming and be happy and leave me in peace” (GR, 553).

⁷⁴⁹ Pöhlmann, *Pynchon’s Postnational Imagination*, 175.

4. *Metanoia*

Slothrop's double-minded approach is nowhere more clearly conveyed than in his encounter with one of the Zone's children. In Berlin he meets Bianca ('the white one') and her mother Margherita Erdmann, a former star, who, featuring in a "string of dirty movies" (GR, 461), represents little more than a fetish construct of male fantasies. The twelve-year old girl "produces the most profound change in Slothrop's behavior in that it frees him from his erectile conditioning", as Bernard Duyfhuizen points out.⁷⁵⁰ The gesture of love that seems to trigger this change, however, is highly misleading. Bianca and Slothrop have sex on board the ship *Anubis* during a "Walpurgisnacht" (GR, 463) party. The intercourse itself, conveyed to the reader only in a reconstruction in Slothrop's memory, presents him at the apex of the phallic order. Here, he perceives himself being "inside his own cock", the "metropolitan organ entirely, the colonial tissue forgotten", filled with an "extraordinary sense of waiting to rise", while he remembers his orgasm as an announcement of the "void, what could it be but the kingly voice of the Aggregat itself?" (GR, 470).⁷⁵¹ Afterwards Bianca suggests: "We can get away. I'm a child, I know how to hide. I know how to hide you too", and it is through this suggestion that Slothrop realises "she exists, love" (*ibid.*). It is Bianca's love, an agapistic gift offered without the expectation of anything given return, which seems to cause a complete *metanoia* of Slothrop. Both the event and its effects, however, are at least as ambiguous as in the case of Gaddis's Wyatt.

In the depiction of Slothrop's *metanoia*, or reversal, Pynchon again alludes to Brown and Marcuse, and given his critical distance to countercultural mystifications in the context of Weissmann's Great Firing, it is no surprise that the treatment of Slothrop's 'redemption' is equally complicated by critical undertones. A meta-psychological reading against the background of Brown's *Life Against Death* would suggest that the loss of his erectile conditioning constitutes liberation from the phallic order and the pleasure principle he has hitherto represented (cf. LD, 27, 91). His penis

⁷⁵⁰ Duyfhuizen, "A Suspension", §4. Given Bianca's age, the sex scene is one of the most unsettling in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Against this background it is all the more alarming that Slothrop is able to perceive her almost as a Helena (who is assumed by Faust to be a "little girl of ten" in Goethe: F, 7426) or Eurydice figure. Although it is hard to establish an outside perspective, however, *Gravity's Rainbow* distinctly suggests a more disenchanting reading, in which Bianca, like Ludwig, is eventually given hardly anything else than "a lot of chewing gum and a lot of foreign cock" (GR, 729).

⁷⁵¹ In *Love's Body* Brown presents sexual organisation as a "political organization" of the body (LB, 126): "Genital organization is the tyranny", or rather "monarchy" of the genital (LB, 127).

no longer “trying to point up at what was hanging there in the sky for everybody [...]” (GR, 490), Slothrop escapes from the parabolic trajectory of Western civilization. Leaving the “albatross of self” (GR, 623), the ego and his accumulated guilt, he is freed from genital organisation and abandons his obligation to the teleological plot, “sliding into the anti-paranoid part of his cycle” (GR, 434). Concomitant with this change, Slothrop also loses his sense of historical time, a process Pynchon’s narrator formulates in Mondaugen’s Law: “The more you dwell in the past and the future, the thicker your bandwidth, the more solid your persona. But the narrower your sense of Now, the more tenuous you are” (GR, 509). Schachterle, in a Heideggerian reading, interprets this loss of coherence as a possible escape from both the enframing “that hitherto has trapped everybody in the story itself” and the Puritan-induced technique of reading the world with a vested interest “that has conditioned him before”.⁷⁵² Slothrop’s anti-paranoia, as a form of existential rootlessness, as it were, makes him vulnerable,⁷⁵³ for as the narrator suggests, this state, “where nothing is connected to anything” cannot be borne by many for long (GR, 434). Back home in Berkshire, during “days when in superstition and fright he could make it all fit, seeing clearly in each an entry in a record, a history”, he found instruction “in ways deeper than he can explain” (GR, 626). Now he is bereft of a guideline. This state, however, just like Wyatt’s in *The Recognitions*, also enables him to develop openness to Being. Just as the breakdown of the Puritan-cum-paranoid frame appears as a form of liberation, so does the shrinking of Slothrop’s temporal bandwidth. As indicated in the analysis of Dominus Blicero, for Brown, the state of Being without historical time represents an abolishment of repression. With an abolishment of repression, then, that is, a turn from genital organisation:

man could enjoy the life proper to his species, the regressive fixation to the past would dissolve; the restless quest for novelty would be reabsorbed into the desire for pleasurable repetition; the desire to Become would be reabsorbed into the desire to Be. (LD, 93)

In such a state “the restless career of Faustian man came to an end, because he would be satisfied” (LD, 91), and humans would be “ready to live instead of making history” (LD, 19). The tyranny of the ego/genital and the Faustian flight from death seem to be

⁷⁵² Schachterle, “Pynchon and the Civil Wars of Technology”, 265.

⁷⁵³ See Tabbi, *Postmodern Sublime*, 122-23.

overcome. Having won “freedom from the individual will”, as Hume argues,⁷⁵⁴ Slothrop is freed from his obsession, no longer defined by trying to satisfy his indefinite desire, no longer willing to play a pretend hero figure. In losing his temporal consciousness he leaves the religion of guilt, the soteriological economy of his Puritan legacy and with that, as the allusions to Brown imply, the fate to continue the guilt-work of his ancestors: “the grip of the dead hand of the past on life in the present would be loosened, and man would be ready to live” (LD, 19). Slothrop is freed from the ‘phylogentic curse’ of his consciousness, exits the trajectory of accumulated time and guilt.

A closer reading of Slothrop’s turn to a atemporal consciousness and ‘pure’ Being, however, suggests that Pynchon depicts the latter also as a missed chance to become a ‘person’ and develop an ability to care.⁷⁵⁵ Slothrop is ‘ready to live, but he fails “to formulate his own identity” at the moment of liberation.⁷⁵⁶ He literally just is, lets things be, for better or for worse. He may have dismantled his ego, but without self-recognition he is incapable of mutual recognition. Sitting in Säure Bummer’s kitchen and finding “in every bone and cabbage leaf paraphrases of himself” (GR, 625) is one of the last things he does before he ultimately (dis-)integrates. And even when he is urged to acquire the “physical grace” that keeps things “working” (GR, 741) as a form of last minute intervention, he is unable to accept. Moreover, when the novel suggests that Slothrop’s waning bandwidth is concomitant with “negligence”, concluding “likewise groweth his Preterition for sure” (GR, 509), it neither points to possibilities of pure being outside historical time, nor to the attainment of freedom as an ‘invisible’ preterite, as Moore argues,⁷⁵⁷ but to narcissistic blindness and eventually a loss of care.

Arguing from the perspective of information technology, Schachterle holds that the metaphor of shrunken bandwidth indicates an inability to communicate. But it signifies more: “[a]s Goethe reminds us”, he notes, alluding to *Faust*,

we can never point to a present perfect Moment; our present is fused with a sense of organic unfolding from the apprehended past to some unapprehended afterwards. Only this sense of

⁷⁵⁴ Hume, *Pynchon’s Mythography*, 151.

⁷⁵⁵ For the relation between consciousness, time, and personal identity, see Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, 120-21.

⁷⁵⁶ Duyfhuizen, “A Suspension”, §4.

⁷⁵⁷ Moore, *The Style of Connectedness*, 241.

time in motion permits us to be conscious of self vis-à-vis world. Without this conscious of self, we could not transmit information.⁷⁵⁸

While the lieutenant's empathetic abilities have already been problematic in London—"[o]nce upon a time Slothrop cared", but now he finds "himself making small bets" about where the doodlebugs hit (GR, 21)—they are further complicated in the Zone, where he finds it increasingly difficult to connect to others. This lack of affect comes fully to the fore in the 'redeeming' scene with Bianca. She, like Ilse and Gottfried, represents before anything else the plight of children in the Zone, and her gift, as Duyfhuizen argues, "is also a plea for help".⁷⁵⁹ Slothrop understands her offer, her ability to hide him, and eventually her plea, but he disentangles himself: "Sure he'll stay for a while, but eventually he'll go, and for this he is to be counted, after all, among the Zone's lost" (GR, 470). Suggesting a causal relationship between this renunciation and his later fate, the narrator points to a missed chance of 'redemption', it seems, not because Slothrop renounces her gift of selfless love but neglects his own obligation. He feels the urge to bring her out, constantly asks whether she is going to be safe with her mother, but rather than taking the chance to exit the game with her, he reverts to the plot he has devised for himself. Dismissing his emotional impulse to rescue her as an "Eurydice obsession", he muses that it would be "much easier just to leave her there [...] Why bring her back? Why try?" (GR, 472). If one can identify a mythical correlative to such behaviour, it is that of Faust in the Gretchen-tragedy.⁷⁶⁰ Like Faust, Slothrop hides entirely behind rhetoric and mystifications, dismissing his own potentials to help her, as if asking what can a preterite do after all? Having lost Bianca for good, then, Slothrop entirely dismisses care:

Even a month ago, given a day or two of peace, he might have found his way back [...] But nowadays, some kind of space he cannot go against has opened behind Slothrop, bridges that

⁷⁵⁸ Lance Schachterle, "Bandwidth as Metaphor for Consciousness in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*", *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 22, no. 1 (1989), 110.

⁷⁵⁹ Duyfhuizen, "A Suspension", § 12.

⁷⁶⁰ In the last section of *Faust I*, Goethe's scholar is rejuvenated by a magic potion that also "whets" his erotic "appetite" (F, 2588). Entranced by the apparition of Helen of Troy in a mirror, he sets out to grasp for the ideal of womanhood, the concrete manifestation of which he encounters in Margareta. Dreaming of heartfelt love, he is enchanted by her loveliness, virtuousness, modesty, and grace and orders Mephistopheles to "get" (F, 2619) the girl for him, only to ruin her entirely. Having 'removed' her brother and mother, whose petit bourgeois morals contravened a sexual liaison, impregnated her, and then wandered off, he finds out later that she has killed the infant out of despair and is to be executed. Faust accuses Mephistopheles of having corrupted him, and wallowing in guilt, he then decides that he is too base and wretched to help her, factually renouncing any responsibility.

might have led back are down for good. He is growing less anxious about betraying those who trust him. He feels obligation less immediately. (GR, 490-91)

This drifting into carelessness considerably complicates a positively biased reading of Slothrop's redemption. Slothrop, to summarise, is a pawn in 'Their' game, as so many other characters in the novel are. Yet he not only deliberately chooses to play his part as a hyperbolic representative of the phallic order; most bitterly, his turn also presents certain countercultural rationales as doomed to failure.⁷⁶¹ The essence of technology may divest humans of the capability to care, but so does the essence of pure Being that has 'transcended' reality.

5. Scattering

Goethe's warning: "Do not, I beg you, look for anything behind the phenomena. They are themselves their own lesson." had become incomprehensible to the century of Marx and Darwin.
—Spengler, *The Decline of the West*⁷⁶²

In terms of mythological allusions, Pynchon indicates Slothrop's *metanoia* with an increasing number of allusions to the Orpheus myth. No other mythological figure, especially mediated through Rilke, suggests itself as a more potent counter-model to Slothrop's previous striving. In *Eros and Civilization*, for instance, Marcuse names Orpheus (and Narcissus) as a counter-figure to the Western culture hero Prometheus, the "archetype-hero of the performance principle", whose "unceasing effort to master life" is both a blessing and curse (EC, 161). Orpheus, akin to Dionysus, "the antagonist of the god who sanctions the logic of domination, the realm of reason" (EC, 162), is the polar opposite to Prometheus. He represents "joy and fulfilment; the voice which does not command but sings; the gesture which offers and receives; the deed which is peace and ends the labor of conquest" (EC, 162). As a cultural hero, Orpheus is thereby the figure of ultimate liberation, committed to "the redemption of pleasure, the halt of time, the absorption of death", reconciling Eros and Thanatos, not "as destruction but as peace, not as terror but as beauty" (EC, 164). Just as the orphic Eros awakens potentials in things animate and inanimate, it transforms, liberates (EC,

⁷⁶¹ See, in this context, McCann, "Down to the people", 260.

⁷⁶² Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, 1:156.

171), and releases their telos of being “just [...] what they are” (EC, 165), Orpheus himself is the proponent of the Great Refusal; he “establishes a higher order in the world—an order without repression” (EC, 170). In the same vein, Rilke’s poetry, especially his *Sonnets to Orpheus* and the ninth Duino elegy, are considered to be a counterpart to the Western Promethean model or even as a reversal of “Faust’s creed”.⁷⁶³

At the end of his ‘pilgrimage’ Slothrop finds his old Hohner mouth harp again, making “audible the spirits of lost harpmen” and coming “closer to being a spiritual medium than he’s ever been yet” (GR, 622). Drawing from Rilke’s *Sonnets to Orpheus* (II, 29), Pynchon glosses this state:

Like that Rilke prophesied,
And though Earthliness forget you,
To the stilled Earth say: I flow,
To the rushing water speak; I am. (*Ibid.*)

He turns from enframing to openness and fulfils Geli and Squalidozzi’s assertion of the openness of the Zone. One is inclined to take the suggested poetic transcendence at face value, especially since the intertextual parallel is unmarred by appropriations or misreading by the character, as is the case in Weissmann’s Rilkean connection. Yet, despite the establishment of the parallel by an authorial voice, the simple fact that Pynchon radically exploits and subverts any mythical correlative in *Gravity’s Rainbow* is indicator enough that Slothrop’s ‘transformation’ may not be exempt from a tongue in cheek use.⁷⁶⁴

⁷⁶³ Stahl, *Creativity*, 23.

⁷⁶⁴ See Charles Hohmann, *Angel and Rocket: Pynchon’s ‘Gravity’s Rainbow’ and Rilke’s ‘Duino Elegies’* (Norderstedt: Books on Demand, 2009), 94-95. This tongue in cheek use is most explicit in the manner Pynchon ironically undercuts the magic happening at Rilke’s “crossroads”: Slothrop, one reads, “lying one afternoon spread-eagled at his ease in the sun, [...] becomes a cross himself, a crossroads, a living intersection where the judges have come to set up a gibbet for a common criminal who is to be hanged at noon” (GR, 625). A mandrake root grows where the criminal dies and is dug up by a magician, who “takes the root tenderly home, dresses it in a little white outfit and leaves money with it overnight: in the morning the cash has multiplied tenfold. A delegate from the Committee on Idiopathic Archetypes comes to visit. ‘Inflation?’ the Magician tries to cover up with some flowing hand-moves. “‘Capital?’ Never heard of that.’ ‘No, no,’ replies the visitor, ‘not at the moment. We’re trying to think ahead’” (*ibid.*). However ludicrous the account itself, its message is that any ‘genuine’ magic, any alternative or countercultural praxis is bound to be commoditised. The connection between ‘countercultural’ Orpheus and capital may be incidental, but the arguments Christopher Lasch made some years after *Gravity’s Rainbow* was published provide ample insight into how notions of ‘selfless’ mysticism and ‘authentic being’ became part and parcel of narcissistic individualism.

Just before his eventual dissolution, Slothrop sees a rainbow and appears to have a redeeming moment:

Slothrop sees a very thick rainbow [...], a stout rainbow cock driven down out of pubic clouds into Earth, green wet valleyed Earth, and his chest fills and he stands crying, not a thing in his head, just feeling natural... (GR, 626)

The vision, more pornographic than biblical, is hardly reminiscent of the symbolic celestial bridge, the covenant of God with man (Genesis 9:12), nor fully viable as a symbol of reintegration in the manner of Jung or D. H. Lawrence. Accordingly, in their discussions of Goethean traces in *Gravity's Rainbow*, both Hume and Grim relate Slothrop's rainbow encounter with that of Faust, reading the former as a neo-Platonic epistemological allegory from the perspective of the latter.⁷⁶⁵ Against the background of Slothrop's turn from totalising epistemologies to anti-paranoia such a comparison appears convincing. However, both critics tend to overlook that the ethical-aesthetical formula comprised in *Gravity's Rainbow* is crucially different to that of *Faust* and in many respects closer to that of *The Magic Mountain*.

Comparing the scene with that in *Faust* as described in the first chapter, the difference to *Gravity's Rainbow* is apparent. Like in Goethe, the rainbow vision marks one stage in the change of the protagonist's attitude, but in contrast to the former, the irony in Pynchon is that Slothrop takes no 'message' from the vision: there is not a thing in his head. As Madsen holds, "Slothrop simply refuses, finally, to interpret".⁷⁶⁶ Thus, rather than serving as an elaborate allegory of human striving, the rainbow vision in *Gravity's Rainbow* is foremost a plain affirmation of vital forces: "cock", "green wet valleyed earth", "feeling natural". In many respects this image is a 'response' to *The Magic Mountain* (bearing in mind that Mann's novel heavily draws from the first part of Goethe's drama). At an early stage in the novel, Castorp muses about the nature of life, assuming that it "was not mater and it was not spirit, but something between the two, a phenomenon conveyed by matter, like the rainbow on the waterfall, and like the flame" (MM, 275-76). In the midst of his snow-dream, in which he also divines the Grail, Castorp sees such a phenomenon:

⁷⁶⁵ Although neither critic examines it, Pynchon's link to epistemological aspects in Goethe can be substantiated via Brown's *Love's Body* (246).

⁷⁶⁶ Madsen, *The Postmodernist Allegories*, 101.

A rainbow flung its arc slanting across the scene, most bright and perfect, a sheer delight, all its rich glossy, banded colours moistly shimmering down into the thick, lustrous green. It was like music, like the sound of harps comingled with flutes and violins. (MM, 490)

As his dream continues, Castorp's heart opens "in a responsive love, keen almost to pain" (MM, 491) to a vision of the 'Grail', that is, a future humanity living in spite of death and disease. Castorp's dream leads him through a Mediterranean bucolic idyll of joyful children playing in the sun at the heart of which stands a temple, in which he finds two witchlike women dismembering a child. Castorp comes to understand that one cannot have beauty alone but "must have the other half of the story, the other side" (MM, 495), that behind man's "courteous and enlightened state" the "horrible blood-sacrifice" is consummated (*ibid.*). This insight leads him to divine an image of man as true *homo dei*, the "lord of counter-positions", too "aristocratic for death" and free in mind, neither directed by desire nor reason but love:

It is love, not reason, that is stronger than death. Only love, not reason, gives sweet thoughts. And from love and sweetness alone can form come: form and civilization, friendly, enlightened, beautiful human intercourse—always in silent recognition of the blood-sacrifice (MM, 496)

Like Faust, Castorp is granted the vision of an ideal humanity, a future civilization. But while Goethe's scholar ultimately misunderstands the 'message' of the rainbow, trying to achieve mastery in a loveless quest, Castorp soon forgets his pledge to defy the lure of death, naively following the 'call of his blood' (MM, 712) and the neo-romantic mystification of dying. In the battlefield of Flanders, with Schubert's "Lindenbaum" on his lips, Castorp then encounters the opposite of the 'grail':

He [Castorp] lies with his face in the cold mire [...] The product of a perverted science, laden with death, slopes earthward thirty paces in front of him and buries its nose in the ground; explodes inside there, with hideous expense of power, and raises up a fountain high as a house, of mud, iron, molten metal, scattered fragments of humanity. Where it fell, two youths had lain, friends who in their need flung themselves down together—now they are scattered, comingled and gone. (MM, 715)

Castorp survives this scattering, but his "prospects are poor" (MM, 716). Like the two youths, he will end as a sacrifice for the future of his nation but not a better humanity.

Despite its contiguity to *Faust*, Slothrop's end appears to be more an ironic version of Castorp's story. As Slothrop's scattering plainly indicates, the 'result' of his encounter is not a pedagogy of personal unity or self-mastery, no image of *homo dei*. Slothrop, after a life-long adherence to rationales of power, domination, and death, is finally freed from the "terrible politics of the Grail" (GR, 701). Just feeling natural, he no longer asks: "What do I need that badly?" (GR, 490) and dissolves into the texture of *Gravity's Rainbow* some hundred pages before the novel's ending. Although he has "begun to thin, to scatter", "as noted", at least "as early as the Anubis era" (GR, 509), he now fragments "all over the Zone. It's doubtful if he can ever be 'found' again, in the conventional sense of "positively identified and detained" (GR, 712). Trying to press the ending into the Faustian correlative, Grim notes: in "an age in which Dr. Faust's feats of necromancy are being actualized, the wisest course of action for any Faust to take may be a disappearing act".⁷⁶⁷ As aptly as the formulation "disappearing act" describes the volitional basis of Slothrop's disintegration, it does not fully acknowledge that he does not merely give in but also gives back. In contrast to the Faustian characters Weissmann or Mondaugen, whose striving for unity leads to destruction, he has himself broken down, vanishes out of sight, but some of his "fragments" may "have grown into consistent personae of their own" (GR, 742).

Its ambiguous character makes Slothrop's act available for interpretation in the manner of Paul Mann, who sees in Slothrop's "disappearance from the tracking systems of *Gravity's Rainbow*" a gesture of resistance, an "unprecedented silence, exile and cunning; samizdat networks, amnesiac and subhistorical".⁷⁶⁸ Thus, Paul Mann writes: "Hardly gone: in fact it is everywhere", and this is exactly Slothrop's transformation.⁷⁶⁹ Invisibility becomes a figure of resistance, both to Christian eschatology and entropic telos. With his 'disappearance', I contend, Slothrop enacts what Agamben describes as the benefit of those in limbo:

The greatest punishment—the lack of the vision of God—thus turns into a natural joy: Irremediably lost, they persist without pain in divine abandon. God has not forgotten them,

⁷⁶⁷ Grim, *The Faust Legend*, 2.84.

⁷⁶⁸ Mann, *Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde*, 144.

⁷⁶⁹ *Ibid.*; cf. Chambers, who, drawing from Heidegger, argues that Slothrop turns into the "all", the whole of the "open", fusing with the infinite and boundless, in becoming a "crossroad" (GR, 626). Chambers, *Thomas Pynchon*, 180. For Heidegger's interpretation of "openness" in Rilke, a concept he sees in direct opposition to technological rationales, see "Why Poets?", in *Off the Beaten Track*, 212-13. Moore also relates Pynchon's keyword "openness" to Rilke (*The Style of Connectedness*, 51N24).

but rather they have always already forgotten God; and in the face of their forgetfulness, God's forgetting is impotent. Like letters with no addressee, these uprisen beings remain without a destination. Neither blessed like the elected, nor hopeless like the damned, they are infused with a joy with no outlet.⁷⁷⁰

Ironically, in Slothrop's hermetic tale of humanity sacrificed for the science of death thus resides an indication that replenishment is possible. His 'withdrawal' does not bear many connotations of Žižek's notion of being at home on the surface of earth, of being able to realise one's "potential through an active, productive exchange with it",⁷⁷¹ and in this respect it is antithetical to Wyatt Gwyon's call for simplification and conscious 'living through'. What both characters share, however, is that the eventual import of Slothrop's end is not a question of pure Being or of redemption. As Marcuse argues, Orpheus remains a symbol and never represents real existence: the images of the Orphic "world are essentially unreal and unrealistic"; they designate an "impossible' attitude and existence" and do neither "convey a 'mode of living'" nor a message, at least only the negative one that "one cannot defeat death" (EC, 165). I contend that *Gravity's Rainbow* takes this very notion as the basis for inverting the lethal message Mondaugen receives, for indicating another world is possible. The fragmentation marking the end of "Slothrop *qua* Slothrop" (GR, 738) also marks a beginning, the continuation of life despite death, of paying due debts to nature and being transmuted to new life in the multiplicity of his 'offshoots'. Thus, to draw from Pöhlmann, Slothrop's ending is "admittedly ambivalent, but it can nevertheless be read as a positive narrative".⁷⁷²

6. By Means of Conclusion: Descent

Unlike Goethe, Pynchon does not project a utopia onto heaven, but his focus remains on the given. While the Chorus Mysticus proclaims at the end of *Faust* that "[a]ll that must disappear/ is but a parable" (F, 12104-05), alluding to Platonic realms and possibilities of reconciliation, *Gravity's Rainbow* points to another direction, not disentangling from but reaching into reality and thereby turning aesthetics into a

⁷⁷⁰ Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 5-6.

⁷⁷¹ Žižek and Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 265.

⁷⁷² Pöhlmann, *Pynchon's Postnational Imagination*, 357; cf. Hite, who holds that by fragmenting, Slothrop ceases to be a one-dimensional man in Marcuse's terms (*Ideas of Order*, 118).

political claim. After Slothrop's tale ends, the story of *Gravity's Rainbow* follows the trajectory of the V2. When the pseudo-Faust has been "weeded out" (GR, 508), the Brocken-complex bureaucratized, and a political utopia erased, the markets will have taken over, the bureaucrats, and the priests of the machine, melting all that is mythical into dreams of control. Slothrop ironically turns to the 'open' at the time when the openness of the Zone vanishes, Orpheus lays down his harp, and the Apollonian "sun will rule all enterprise" (*ibid.*). What remains after the end of the German Oven State, then, is the assembly of what Lewis Mumford calls the megamachine, the interlocking of political, economic, military, and bureaucratic systems into a "final totalitarian structure" that supersedes all organically grown culture.⁷⁷³ Tchitcherine divines an industrial covenant, a "structure cutting across every agency human and paper that ever touched it":

Oh, a State begins to take form in the stateless German night, a State that spans oceans and surface politics, sovereign as the International or the Church of Rome, and the Rocket is its soul. (GR, 566)

And however non-linear and fragmented the last section of the novel is, the trajectory of the rocket, this soul of the emergent post-war cartel conglomerate, spans directly to the very last page of the novel. If both Castorp and Slothrop are inspired by life's forces, death and repression nevertheless prevails. Thus, Slothrop's vision of the "rainbow cock" is succeeded by an image of a "white genital onset in the sky", the "pale Virgin" rising over Hiroshima (GR, 694), and the remaining 'fragments' of *Gravity's Rainbow* are mostly devoted to the progress of death as described in Blicero's Marcusean 'prophecy'. Some of Slothrop's offshoots, just like Weissmann and the Rocket, may have found their way back to America. The spirit of harpmen inspires the Neo-Orphic "freaks" (GR, 755) of 1973 LA, but a thinly disguised Richard Nixon has already "come out against what he calls irresponsible use of the harmonica" (GR, 754) and dreams of relocating the harpmen to a "nice secure home" right "next to Disneyland" (GR, 756)—whether for their 're-education' or other purposes is unclear.⁷⁷⁴ Nazi Germany and post-war America conflate. The Rocket

⁷⁷³ Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine*, 188-89, 201.

⁷⁷⁴ Pynchon subtly locates his Nixon caricature with figures and themes characteristic of the German technocrats in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Richard M. Zhubb, who has a habit of throwing his arms up into an inverted 'peace sign' (GR, 755), is, significantly, the "night manager" of the Orpheus Theatre (GR,

“reaches its last unmeasurable gap above the roof of this old theatre” (GR, 760) run by Zhlub. “There is time” (*ibid.*) to gain comfort, enough time to sing a hymn by William Slothrop forgotten for centuries. Heidegger notes in “Why Poets?” that in the world’s night, in which the gods have fled and all “radiance of divinity” is extinguished, poetry and song is to “attend to the track of the fugitive gods”, to utter the sacred,⁷⁷⁵ but in the radically disenchanted world of *Gravity’s Rainbow* song is not always a “magic cape” (GR, 701). It establishes solidarity amongst the audience in the night of the Orpheus theatre, a memory of the path not taken, but it cannot substitute for the missing light. Myths, as Thomas notes, whether the neo-pagan rites in the Zone or that of Orpheus, “will not bring back the dead or heal a ruined face”,⁷⁷⁶ and eventually *Gravity’s Rainbow* itself does not escape the pull of what it is written against. Although it is certainly ‘Bad and Big enough’ to challenge the Faustian machineries of Western civilization, it cannot be, to draw from Leo Bersani, outside the systems against which it writes.⁷⁷⁷ Thus, as the slices of film in the Orpheus Theatre have “broken, or a projector bulb has burned out”, the reader is not released with the memory of a consoling fiction but addressed before the novel violently ends in a dash: “Now everybody—” (GR, 760).

754), driving a “black Managerial Volkswagen” (GR, 755) and working in the same alleged “spirit of fair play” (GR, 756) Pynchon alludes to in the “honest and sporting” enterprise emergent in the closure of the Zone (GR, 508).

⁷⁷⁵ Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, 202.

⁷⁷⁶ Thomas, *Pynchon and the Political*, 70.

⁷⁷⁷ See Leo Bersani, “Pynchon, Paranoia, and Literature”, *Representations* 25 (1989): 116.

Conclusion: Satire, Myth, and Ethics

Ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, filii et spiritus sancti sed in nomine diaboli
—Herman Melville⁷⁷⁸

This is what we want: to sabotage history. They won't know whether we're serious or whether we are writing fiction . . . they can't tell whether our fictions are the real thing or whether they're merely fictional. Always keep them guessing. That'll bug them, probably drive them up the walls.
—Ishmael Reed⁷⁷⁹

Gaddis and Pynchon extensively draw from the Faust myth in their investigations into the lapses of Western civilization. What sets them apart from the earliest literary versions of the myth is the refusal to measure the destructive effects of human hubris against religious or other absolutes. Their worlds do not need a devil, as they suspect, like Valéry's Mephisto, that people are "clever enough to damn themselves by their own devices".⁷⁸⁰

At a first glance, the individual emphases of *The Recognitions*, *V.*, and *Gravity's Rainbow* vary, with Gaddis focusing more directly on the alchemy of capitalism as expressed in the domain of art and Pynchon on that of technologies in the service of power. Whereas Gaddis remains less political, although subtly indicating totalitarian sensibilities in some of his characters, Pynchon depicts self-aggrandisement in decidedly political terms. Equally, while Gaddis prefigures Pynchon's complex allusiveness, self-conscious style, and his use of black humour, the latter does show less nostalgia for grand narratives and a greater stress on pop-cultural elements. In essence, however, their agenda remains the same, for both provide comprehensive satirical surveys of an omnipresent Faustian machinery comprising individual pathologies, collective structures, religious, political, and even countercultural forces are shown to work in complicity with the 'System'. Both describe a fully 'rationalised' and administered world subjugated to the *libido dominandi* of political and economic elites. Enlightenment ideals (human autonomy, individualism, commitment to reason, a belief in progress and science) as subsumed under the primacy of capitalism are portrayed to foster an ultimately inhumane logic. At the same time both make charges against Puritanism's claim on absolutes and its soteriological economy that substantially contributed to the ultimately hubristic claim

⁷⁷⁸ Cited in Fiedler, *Love and Death*, 418.

⁷⁷⁹ Cited in Richard Martin, "Clio Bemused: The Uses of History in Contemporary American Fiction", *Sub-Stance* 9 (1980): 21.

⁷⁸⁰ Valéry, *Plays*, 41.

of mastering the natural and social world. In Gaddis, capitalism feeds on spiritual insecurity and the longing for redemption; in Pynchon, the doctrine of unconditional election is held responsible for supplying the ideological basis of domination. In summary, both present the pursuit of salvation for better or worse as a Faustian bargain.

In terms of how Pynchon and Gaddis tackle the ‘devilish’ traits of the West, both display an astonishingly similar method. Both make substantial use of elements from various Faust versions for modelling their plots and additionally employ patterns and allusions taken from Spengler, Wiener, Huizinga, and Adams in order to convey a sense of decline. Yet they also contravene the teleological drive and deterministic vision of these plots by means of indirection, aporia, and pre-emptive ‘self-deconstruction’, that is, the imposition of rival systems of order, be they scientific, mythological or pathological, without resolving the conflict between them.⁷⁸¹ Writing in the spirit of Nietzsche (and Vaihinger, or Heisenberg, for that matter), they thereby point to the “inexorable provisionality of all truth conditions”, as Heffernan notes,⁷⁸² while refusing to let their narrations stabilise into a “fixed interpretation from a self-confident ideological standpoint”.⁷⁸³ Mythopoesis plays a crucial part in this agenda in that it challenges one-dimensional world-views and ethically valorises what is narrated. As Safer notes, Gaddis (and Pynchon) alludes to earlier literature and myth “in order to show an ironic contrast with the precepts of his era”.⁷⁸⁴ The present is judged by means of mythological associations. While modernist writers used allusions to strengthen connections between themes and values of their works, however, Gaddis and Pynchon’s major means of ridiculing contemporary “society is through ironic allusiveness”.⁷⁸⁵ This establishes a harsher contrast between mythic past and disenchanted present, but it also allows for exploiting myth while simultaneously undermining it. Like Joyce or Mann, they are consciously and self-consciously mythopoeic, but while the modernist story alludes to a “prior myth that is a key to its

⁷⁸¹ See Comnes, *The Ethics of Indeterminacy*, 41.

⁷⁸² Heffernan, “*The Recognitions* by William Gaddis”, 76.

⁷⁸³ Bell, *Literature, Modernism, and Myth*, 210. This does not necessarily mean that Gaddis and Pynchon are ideology free. In contrast to their predecessors, however, they self-consciously expose their own part in the game as well as anyone else’s.

⁷⁸⁴ Safer, “Ironic Allusiveness”, 73.

⁷⁸⁵ *Ibid.* In his comparison of narratives techniques in *Doctor Faustus* and *The Recognitions*, Brownson, for instance fails to acknowledge this characteristic, dismissing the “irrational, suggestive qualities” of Gaddis’s text: “In comparison with Mann, Gaddis appears to be imprecise and to fail to make use of the potential significance of much of the cultural material to which he refers” (“Techniques of Reference”, iv).

meanings”,⁷⁸⁶ as Brook-Rose observes, the major sources in Gaddis and Pynchon are called upon and subverted.⁷⁸⁷ Yet although the truth claim of myth (or any other epistemological system) is not accepted as objectively valid, both authors substantially utilise its provision of ethically valorised perspectives onto the narrated present. In a world of “reason in insomniac overdrive”,⁷⁸⁸ myth, as a category of ‘as if’ in Vaihinger’s terms, is used to suggest a worldview outside the parameters of instrumentality, utility, controllability, and profitability. It thereby provides a heuristic horizon, a self-consciously devised operational framework conveying value and orientation without naturalising and depoliticising its assertions. Thus, alchemy provides in Gaddis a perspective on what Brown calls its “pseudosecular heir, modern capitalism” (LD, 258). Thus, in Pynchon, where magic may not be enough to change the world and is always on the verge of being rationalised and incorporated by capitalist principles, it is “not necessarily fantasy” (GR, 735) but “still there, though latent, needing only to touch the right sensitive head to reassert itself” (GR, 588). While what Pynchon calls the Luddite ‘Badass’, big and bad enough to act against the machine, may only be found outside fiction, literature’s insistence on the miraculous represents at least a mode of problematizing the machine.⁷⁸⁹

Against this background it also becomes clear why the myth of Faust is chosen as a dominant correlative. This myth is not simply a further layer in a playful multiplicity but central to an ethically informed mythography. Since it negotiates human self-apotheosis gone wrong, it makes itself available to both authors’ critique of Western modernity. Yet it is also the double-edged character of the myth that renders Faust suitable for their novels. Since hardly any other myth has been so extensively made a site of ideological trench-fights, it gives testimony to how easily mythical narratives can be appropriated for paranoid, if not totalitarian endeavours. The aversion to such dialectics, clearly manifest in Gaddis and Pynchon, is expressed in a subversive inversion of seemingly self-evident notions of saintliness, a radical questioning of soteriological agendas, and a utilisation of the heretical material conveyed in the tradition of the magus. It eventually also entails, however, that both do not fully

⁷⁸⁶ Brook-Rose, *The Rhetoric of the Unreal*, 354.

⁷⁸⁷ See Safer, “Ironic Allusiveness”, 76.

⁷⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁷⁸⁹ As Elias notes, mythical and other visions in Pynchon serve as a “counter-history to the rationalistic monovocal Anglo-European history of technocratic capitalism” (“History”, 133). Yet, as shown in my discussion of mythical allusions in Weissmann’s *Great Firing* and Slothrop’s dispersal, such visions have to be read *cum grano salis*.

subscribe to the totalising narrative of the Faust myth. As Cowart argues in the case of Pynchon: the latter “deconstructs myth, and with it the modernist pretense of postreligious metanarrative”.⁷⁹⁰ Although Pynchon is more radical in the latter respect than Gaddis, they do not share David Hawkes’s claim that “it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that the Western world has sold its soul to Satan”,⁷⁹¹ and neither do they resort to Spenglerian fatalism. Leaving it unresolved whether their Fausts are redeemed or damned, they suggest that mankind, although fallible, is not yet fallen. Unlike Spengler (or even Goethe), they also refuse to make predictions or state ‘solutions’. Religious doctrines are dismissed as supportive of the human *libido dominandi*, overt political commitments cannot be found, and social ideals, such as Gaddis’s agapistic communities or Pynchon’s notions of keeping cool but caring or of living in accord with nature, are hardly posited as absolute normative horizons.⁷⁹² The pre-Protestant era is by no means portrayed as an economy-free Eden, for as much as Gaddis’s Flemish painters are working for the culture industry, Pynchon’s mandrake-digging magicians are aware of the significance of capital. Even more so, when Gaddis’s characters lament that a specific mode of community has been lost in society, this mode is first and foremost undermined by its proponents. Similarly, Pynchon’s critique of industrial and military technology does not seriously propose a return to a preindustrial ‘idyll’ (or any origin, which his novels dismiss as impossible), and his countercultural forces are eventually swallowed by the ‘System’. Thus, while *The Recognitions*, *V.*, and *Gravity’s Rainbow* see their protagonists disintegrate, the Faustian machineries keep rolling.

Depictions of real chances of freedom are tentative and at best ambiguous, remaining at a ‘slender interface’. As regards what to do at this interface, Pynchon points to a simple *life and love*.⁷⁹³ Love, not as panacea, as Gaddis suggests, neither as an opposition to war and death, but as ethical commitment and the will to choose, in recognition of the slow hard work entailed, a game “full of light and kindness” (GR, 622), to cite Pynchon’s dope fiend Bummer. Thus, even though *Gravity’s Rainbow* (and *V.*) engages in the most radical criticism of Western civilization, frequently hinting at missed chances, lost routes back, and waning hopes, it includes an inquiry into counterpoints to the *conditio Faustiana*, presenting a micrology of persistence,

⁷⁹⁰ Cowart, *Thomas Pynchon and the Dark Passages of History*, 56.

⁷⁹¹ Hawkes, *The Faust Myth*, 1.

⁷⁹² See in this context Hume, “The Religious and Political Vision of Pynchon’s *Against the Day*”, 163.

⁷⁹³ See Pöhlmann, *Pynchon’s Postnational Imagination*, 331; Chambers, *Thomas Pynchon*, 128.

finding possibilities in chance and growth in detritus: “But in each of these streets, some vestige of humanity, of Earth, has to remain. No matter what has been done to it, no matter what’s it been used for” (GR, 693).⁷⁹⁴ The logic here, as in Slothrop’s scattering and Mann’s divination of the Grail, is that life needs to be lived not *against* but *despite* death. Here lies, as Moore points out, a chance for human freedom:

Recognition—the exceedingly difficult job of discerning from the *inside* the lines of the force-fields that binds us—remains our only practically possible freedom: the Weberian freedom that consists simply in the realistic awareness of whatever options remain open to us *within* our condition.⁷⁹⁵

The same point can be made for Gaddis in that although *The Recognitions* does not allow for a real escape, it never abandons the search for transcendence. Despite the omnipresent logic of inflation and collapse, it points to a social, fully human mode of development, of living deliberately in recognition of the things worth being, not only those worth having. His message of humane fulfilment of potentials and non-commoditised social interaction (the ‘self who can do more’) conforms in this respect with Goethe’s notion of continual ‘betterment’.

To conclude, the novels of Gaddis and Pynchon do not make any claim that they are written in order to edify or betray any pretensions that they themselves would exist outside the ‘System’. Despite their fantastic digressions, these peculiar Jeremiads remain ‘realistic’ in that they do not point to a ‘better way’ for the mere fact that no better way has been taken. Thus, when both authors refrain from establishing false reconciliation, they thereby concede that, as Pynchon puts it,

[e]xcept for that succession of the criminally insane who have enjoyed power since 1945, including the power to do something about it, most of the rest of us poor sheep have always been struck with simple, standard fear. I think we all have tried to deal with this slow escalation of our helplessness and terror in the few ways open to us, from not thinking about it to going crazy from it. Somewhere on this spectrum of impotence is writing fiction about it.⁷⁹⁶

This does not mean that their readers need to conclude with Benny Profane: “offhand I’d say I haven’t learned a goddamn thing” (V., 454). If anything, a refusal to provide

⁷⁹⁴ See Chambers, *Thomas Pynchon*, 126.

⁷⁹⁵ Moore, *The Style of Connectedness*, xxx.

⁷⁹⁶ Pynchon, “Introduction”, *Slow Learner*, 18-19.

ready-made answers or sanctimonious moralising fosters a mode of resistance to impotence and passivity. If their fiction thereby meets Brooke-Rose's demand of stretching our horizons to breaking point, it also fulfils a crucial function Gaddis described in his unpublished 1978 essay "Literature and Crisis":

It is, in short, a time of crisis. But it has always been a time of crisis, and it is not the purpose of literature to solve it, as a mathematical problem finds a solution. [...] It is [...] the permanent crisis of the human condition, these areas of intuitive as well as rational knowing, of individual frailty and sheer perversity, that literature has never ceased to explore, and so long as we have it, never will.⁷⁹⁷

⁷⁹⁷ Cited in Vanwesenbeeck, "*Agapē Agape*", 18.

Illustrations



Fig. 1: Hieronymus Bosch, "The Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things" (ca. 1500). Museo del Prado, Madrid.



Fig. 2: Pablo Picasso, “Night Fishing in Antibes” (1939). Museum of Modern Art, New York.

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