THE READER’S PROGRESS: THOMAS PYNCHON’S NOVELS
AS ALLEGORIES OF CRITICAL READING PRACTICES
SINCE 1945

by

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ABSTRACT

This project describes the influence of post-1945 cultural, societal, and political developments on reading practices in literature departments in the United States. Reading has been central to the way academics saw themselves in relation to their socio-political surroundings and has been a direct response to or expression of contemporary pressures between the years after World War II and the present. The distinct reading zeitgeist of each of these decades allows us to identify a number of paradigmatic reading stances: readers in the ivory tower, paranoid readers, doubtful readers, resisting readers, meta-readers, Luddite readers, and iconoclast readers.

Thomas Pynchon is one of the few American authors who have published over this exact time span. His novels, when interpreted as allegories of reading, not only reflect the complex changes that have taken place in the reading zeitgeist since 1945 but also lure their readers into assuming certain roles. This “interpellative” function of Pynchon’s novels works in a way that disrupts and challenges the dominant reading paradigm. Pynchon’s sustained preoccupation with reading not only unifies his later novels with his “classical” work of the 1960s and 1970s but also shows him as the most prominent observer of and commentator on post-1945 reading practices in the academy.
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<td>AtD</td>
<td>Against the Day</td>
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<td>CL</td>
<td>The Crying of Lot 49</td>
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<td>En</td>
<td>“Entropy”</td>
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<td>MD</td>
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

An often quoted sentence from Pirate Prentice’s vision of London’s evacuation at the beginning of Gravity’s Rainbow sums up a recurring feeling while working on this dissertation: “No, this is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive knotting into—…” Having felt more than once that my project was turning into something of a Gordian Knot, I want to thank everyone who helped me disentangle my thoughts and tie them into the following 200 or so pages.

First of all, thank you to my dissertation director Fred Whiting, who has helped me throughout this project with the most useful advice and the best pep talks one could ask for. I left his office completely overwhelmed on several occasions—but never without invaluable ideas about how to improve my project or quotable (and unquotable) pieces of wisdom that I will never forget. I am also indebted to the members of my dissertation committee: Barbara Fischer, Heather White, Michael Martone, and Phil Beidler. Thank you for all your help and support throughout this process.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

a. Maps of Reading

About two thirds into Thomas Pynchon’s 2006 novel Against the Day, two characters consult “a gigantic ten-miles-to-the-inch wall map of the Balkans” (689). Looking “at components singly,” warns the owner of the map, Professor Renfrew, is enough to send one running “about the room screaming after a while.” The best way, advises Renfrew, is to look at it “all together, everything in a single timeless snapshot” (Pynchon, AtD 689). Considering that its 1085 pages make Against the Day just as gigantic as Renfrew’s map and that the feeling of wanting to run about the room screaming may be an emotion many first-time readers of Against the Day find familiar, we should heed Renfrew’s admonition and apply it to our reading of the novel. Rather than getting lost in the multiple plot lines, hundreds of characters, historical references, and literary allusions, we should take a step back. Renfrew says:

The railroads seem to be the key. If one keeps looking at the map while walking slowly backwards across the room, at a certain precise distance the structural principle leaps into visibility—how the different lines connect, how they do not, where varying interests may want them to connect, all of this defining patterns of flow, not only actual but also invisible, potential and such rates of change as how quickly one’s relevant masses can be moved to a given frontier … and beyond
that the teleology at work, as the rail system grows towards a certain shape, a
destiny. (Pynchon, AtD 689)

Let us therefore follow this advice and “walk slowly backwards.” At first, we may see how the
different plot lines in Against the Day connect and how the novel “grows towards a certain
shape.” Then, walking even further back, we begin to see connections between Against the Day
and Pynchon’s entire work. Our stepping back from Against the Day reveals familiar building
blocks and references to Pynchon’s first five novels: we see actual and potential patterns,
recurring motifs, and core themes. At this point, we may wonder if Against the Day is not only
comparable to Renfrew’s map of the Balkans but is in itself a map of all other Pynchon novels,
perhaps even a guide on how to read them, and if Renfrew’s comment deals with literary
interpretation in general.

Beginning with Against the Day and then zooming out until connections to Pynchon’s
other novels come into view, my own quick sketch of a “map” shall provide a set of
interconnections and outline the shape into which Pynchon’s novels have grown for me. Against
the Day opens with the Chums of Chance, a Tom Swift-like group of youthful airship
adventurers of the late 19th century, who make immediately clear that the meta-quality of
Renfrew’s advice is a recurring element and that reading is an important concern of the novel.
Not only are there repeated nods of the narrator to the reader and allusions to fictitious other
volumes in a series of Chums of Chance books, there is also a dog who seems to be reading
Henry James, a crew member who shows contempt for books, and crew member Miles Blundell
who has strange moments when he sees “everything just as clear as day, how … how everything
fits together, connects” (24) and who thus anticipates Renfrew’s promised illumination when
taking a few steps back. Considering that Renfrew’s advice seems to be directed at the readers of
the novel, Blundell’s “moments” underscore early on the apparent parallels between the characters in the novel and us as readers. We may begin to wonder, then, if the experiences of the protagonists help us map our own reading or if they offer us advice for our journey through the text. A good example for this kind of mapping in the novel is a scene when two of the Chums hitch a ride on mad scientist Dr. Zoot’s time machine in a later chapter:

They seemed to be in the midst of some great storm in whose low illumination, presently they could make out, in unremitting sweep across the field of vision … some material descent, gray and wind-stressed—undoubted human identities, masses of souls…—a spectral cavalry, faces disquietingly wanting in detail…Were those voices out there crying in pain? sometimes it almost sounded like singing. Sometimes a word or two, in a language almost recognizable, came through. … The chamber shook, as in a hurricane … and the boys found themselves more and more disoriented. (403-4)

Read as a metaphor for our reading of the novel, this scene establishes a clear tripartite structure: the time machine is Against the Day, Dr. Zoot is Pynchon, and the Chums’ disorientation reflects our own. If we interpret this scene as a representation of the rhetorical triangle of author-work-audience, we can also discern a degree of ironic self-bashing on Pynchon’s part, perhaps even the anticipation of negative critical response. The notion of “faces disquietingly wanting in detail” and the description of the time machine/novel as not particularly advanced in appearance—“even the casual eye could detect everywhere emergency weld-lines, careless shimming, unmatched fasteners, blotches of primer coat never painted over, and other evidences of the makeshift” (Pynchon, AtD 402)—sounds strikingly like Michiko Kakutani’s negative New York Times review, in which she described Against the Day’s characters as “little more than stick
figure cartoons” and criticized the “bloated jigsaw puzzle of a story” which she found “orchestrated in a weary and decidedly mechanical fashion” (“Pynchonesque” B1). At the same time, Dr. Zoot gives us a warning that should make us careful not to try and find one definite message at the bottom of the text. Asked by the Chums about what they just saw, the scientist responds: “It’s different for everybody, but don’t bother to tell me, I’ve heard too much than is good for a man, frankly, and it could easily do you some harm as well to even get into the subject.” (Pynchon, AtD 404).

Thus “sensitized” and equipped with a slowly unfolding map of how to read Against the Day, we again and again come across instances when characters find themselves in situations that reflect our own experience of the novel. As Renfrew predicted, we increasingly see lines connect and patterns emerge. There is, for example, a scene in which several characters look at 360 degree panoramas about the history of mathematics. We recognize in it our own encounter of the blurring of fact and fiction in Against the Day: “between the observer at the center of the panorama and the cylindrical wall on which the scene was projected, lay a zone of dual nature, wherein must be correctly arranged a number of ‘real objects’ appropriate to the setting … though these could not strictly be termed entirely real, rather part ‘real’ and part 'pictorial,’ or let us say ‘fictional’” (Pynchon, AtD 632). Tracing scenes like these throughout the novel, further leads us to a character’s sketch-book, entitled The Book of the Masked, which is “filled with encrypted field-notes and occult scientific passages” (Pynchon, AtD 853)—much like Against the Day itself. In the description of this sketch-book a recurring motif of the novel is reiterated: flipping through the pages of The Book of the Masked, Yashmeen Halfcourt, one of the dozen major characters, finds an “unmappable flow of letters and numbers” (Pynchon, AtD 853).
Another structural principle leaps into view for us: the notion of the unmappable. Throughout the novel, we encounter multiple examples of unfamiliar and unmappable parts of towns, maps that cannot be read, or, as the book jacket of the novel indicates, “one or two places not strictly speaking on the map at all.” These unmappable places, streets or symbols that cannot be read, and places that cannot be seen or conquered are juxtaposed to “seekers of certitude” (Pynchon, *AtD* 219) and establish a central contrast between the “uncertainties of night” (Pynchon, *AtD* 281) and “the day [or] all that could be safely illuminated” (Pynchon, *AtD* 298). In combination with the above described thematization of reading, the juxtaposition of certainty and uncertainty, day and night, and the known and the unknown certainly brings to mind fundamental discussions in literary theory about truth, ambiguity, and meaning, between “seekers of certitude” and those emphasizing uncertainty and undecidability.

I have thus far traced a line through *Against the Day* and made some connections that point towards “a certain shape”: the establishment of reader-character parallels, the novel’s thematization of its own reception, and its preoccupation with reading and interpretation in general. What a Renfrewian contemplation of lines and interconnections also reveals, however, are ways in which *Against the Day* incorporates set pieces of and allusions to Pynchon’s previous novels. Given the importance of maps in the novel, we can consider *Against the Day* as a “gigantic map” of Pynchon’s work. Apart from trademark expressions, characters, or concepts that appear in almost every single novel (entropy, characters who are directionless drifters, Seaman Bodine or his ancestors, Jesuit agents, the Angel of Death, ukuleles, and kazooos, for

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1 See, for example, “All through their long discussion they had been walking, walkers in the urban unmappable, and had reached a remote and unfamiliar part of the city” (38), “Merle … found himself unexpectedly miles up some unfamiliar road, as if in the dark he had encountered an unmapped fork” (67), “He was abruptly lost in an unfamiliar part of town—the grid of numbered streets Hunter thought he’d understood made no sense anymore” (154). See also pp. 248-50 for the “Sfinciuno Itinerary” supposedly leading to Shambhala and pp. 935-38 for Ratty McHugh’s map of the Belgian Congo, on which “everything … stands for something else” (937).
example), there are several direct references or correspondences. The search for Shambhala, conducted by the Chums of Chance and several other characters, echoes the quest for the mysterious land of Vheissu in Pynchon’s first novel, *V.* (1963). In the explorers searching for Vheissu and Shambhala, as well as in one of *V*.’s main characters, Herbert Stencil, who is looking for the mysterious woman V., we come across the aforementioned “seekers of certitude” (Pynchon, *AtD* 219). The central mystery in Pynchon’s 1965 novel *The Crying of Lot 49*—the underground courier-system of The Tristero, which uses slightly altered versions of actual stamps—finds its way into *Against the Day* in the form of “*timbres fictifs*” used by the “French chapter” of the Chums of Chance (Pynchon, *AtD* 548) and a secret system of people communicating through gas in Britain (Pynchon, *AtD* 607). If *Gravity’s Rainbow*’s (1973) fragmented form and its use of scientific metaphors were off-putting to many readers (including the Pulitzer Prize jury which called the book unreadable and overwritten, among other things), this is alluded to in a scene in which one of the Chums lectures his fellow crewmembers about fireworks, thus echoing the central metaphor of the V-2 rocket in Pynchon’s third novel:

> Miles bade the company consider, in tones of urgency they seldom heard from him, the nature of the skyrocket’s ascent, in particular that unseen extension of the visible trail, after the propellant charge burns out, yet before the slow-match has ignited the display—that implied moment of implied passage upward, in the dark sky, a linear continuum of points invisible yet present, just before lights by the hundreds appear—

> “Stop, stop!” Darby clutching his ears comically, “it sounds like Chinese!”

(Pynchon, *AtD* 112)
Against the Day further provides us with the back story of the Traverse family which was first mentioned in Pynchon’s 1990 novel Vineland and continues Vineland’s effort to delineate the fate of political radicalism in the U.S. Finally, the railroad lines, connections, and maps in Against the Day not only show an extension of Mason & Dixon’s (1997) preoccupation with lines and borders but also reveal issues that are central to both novels: the dispelling of some “old magic” (Pynchon, AtD 79) by the forces of the new and the “progressive reduction of choices” (Pynchon, AtD 10) inherent in the drawing of lines and borders and, by analogy, in literary interpretation.

If Renfrew’s map is a metaphor for Against the Day and if Against the Day functions as a “map” for all of Pynchon’s novels, the call to step back and look at interconnections and overarching principles applies to Pynchon’s work as a whole. In the following chapters, I will therefore examine what I have rudimentarily outlined on the preceding pages: Pynchon’s establishing of reader-character parallels, his novels’ thematization of their own reception, and their preoccupation with reading and interpretation in general.

b. But wait, there’s more!

Let us, however, take another look at Renfrew’s quote. Apart from telling us to take a step back in order to behold structural principles and sets of interconnections, Renfrew also notes that we will realize “where varying interests will want [the lines] to connect” (Pynchon, AtD 689). If, as I have argued, the passage is about reading, Renfrew’s insistence on interests in reading constitutes a call to “read readings”—to take an even further step back and contemplate the guiding principles and motivations behind certain kinds of readings. There have been several such studies in the past two decades: Alberto Manguel’s A History of Reading, Guglielmo
Cavallo and Roger Chartier’s *A History of Reading in the West*, and the more theoretically-minded *Theories of Reading. Books, Bodies, and Bibliomania* by Karin Littau, for example. These broad historical accounts, based on the premise that, as Cavallo and Chartier put it, “[t]ransformations in the book and transformations in reading practices went hand in hand” (15), focus on several “reading revolutions” in the past centuries. The shifts from reading aloud to reading silently, from monastic to scholastic reading, or towards reading in solitude, along with technological innovations such as the invention of the printing press, the industrialization of printing, and the mass marketing of books constitute such revolutions. As expressions of significant trends in late 20th century literary theory—the critical interest in readers and reading and the emergence of cultural studies—these texts constitute part of an important area of the current academic landscape. My project adds to this small but growing body of scholarship, but is also a move beyond the three texts just mentioned. Manguel’s anecdotal and personal account stops around mid-20th century and Cavallo/Chartier and Littau, their eyes on the potential reading revolution in the wake of the birth of hypermedia and electronic literature, omit the smaller “revolutions” that took place between 1945 and the present. Where I differ most significantly from Manguel and Cavallo/Chartier is in an exclusive focus on academic, rather than popular, reading practices. I do this for three reasons: first, statements about popular reading often are hopelessly reductionist and difficult to prove; second, I read Pynchon’s novels as

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2 I am deliberately excluding the numerous works of reader-response criticism and reception studies here. In their theoretical orientation, they differ from the more general studies of Manguel & Co., which examine the material and technical conditions which led to certain reading practices throughout history. Reader-response theory and reception studies, as pioneered in the Seventies by Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss, Stanley Fish, and others, are less interested in the history and material conditions of reading but rather in the *Act of Reading*, as the title of one of Iser’s books suggests. An excellent recent example that unites theoretical and practical approaches and illustrates the current state of reception studies is Philip Goldstein and James L. Machor’s 2008 book *New Directions in American Reception Study*.

3 See also Elspeth Jajdelska’s 2007 book *Silent Reading and the Birth of the Narrator*.

4 See for example, Chartier’s comments on the difficulty of making statements about popular reading practices in *Forms and Meanings*: “To do so would require looking carefully at communities of readers whose principles of
c. Pynchon’s Novels as Allegories of Critical Reading Practices

What I will argue in the following pages, then, is that questions of how to read, what to read, and how to control the reading habits of students became an enormous cultural anxiety in the academy after World War II. Outside phenomena, politics, and societal developments forced academic readers to leave their ivory tower and to redefine their role in relation to their political, social, and cultural surroundings. The way in which literary text were read and interpreted was central to this transformation of roles. Rather than considering reading an “eternal” or extra-historical act, I examine reading as a symbolic, political or self-defining act that is inexorably intertwined with societal, cultural, or technological developments. I am therefore following Gregory Castle, who argues that “literary theory is always the product or effect of historical conditions, even when a given theory appears ‘ahistorical’” (10). The interrelation of socio-political developments and critical reading habits creates a distinct “reading zeitgeist,” which I will trace through the postwar decades.

Pynchon’s work plays a particularly important role in this. Given their preoccupation with reading, his novels correspond to a fundamental development in post-World War II critical theory: “a marked shift of attention to the reader,” as Terry Eagleton put it (Literary Theory 74). More importantly, however, Pynchon’s novels specifically mirror the complex shifts in critical

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5 See also Terry Eagleton in After Theory: “Even the most rarified theories have a root in historical reality” (23).
reading practices throughout the postwar decades. In doing so, his novels fulfill an important
dual function: not only do they reflect contemporary critical reading practices, they also lure
their readers into imitating the very practices that the novels describe. This process recalls what
Louis Althusser has described as *interpellation*. Althusser’s definition of interpellation as a kind
of “Hey, you there” through which ideology “recruits’ subjects among the individuals … or
‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects” (174) finds an analogy in the way Pynchon’s novels
position their readers in specific roles. The notion of the interpellative nature of ideology can
certainly also be applied to what I have just described as the “reading zeitgeist.” Comparing
Althusser’s thesis that “there is no practice except by and in an ideology” (170) to, for example,
Irving Howe’s definition as zeitgeist as “the vast insidious sum of pressures and fashions” (“Age
of Conformity” 20) makes clear that both are describing all-pervading forces that are hard to
withstand. The dual function of Pynchon’s work is especially important here: by both luring its
readers into certain kinds of reading and explicitly thematizing reading, Pynchon’s novels
function not only as reflections of the dominant reading zeitgeist but also as *interventions*.
Instead of reflecting the zeitgeist in the sense of representation and reiteration of the status quo,
Pynchon’s novels disrupt the predominant reading practices by forcing us to take a step back and
examine our own goals, strategies, and motivations in reading.

Each of the following chapters thus explores several issues: after tracing the influence of
socio-political and cultural phenomena on academic reading practices, I identify a dominant
reading paradigm and examine the ways in which these paradigms are inscribed in Pynchon’s

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6 Since I have been talking about interconnections: Althusser’s specific example, Christian religious ideology,
make use of a scene in which God interpellates Moses. The utterance Althusser cites—“I am that I am” (179)—also
appears in *Mason & Dixon*: in chapter 50, Dixon encounters a group of Kabbalists who tell him about a golem
whose only words are “Eyeh asher Eyeh … I am that which I am” (Pynchon, *MD* 486).
novels.\textsuperscript{7} I am reading his texts as allegories of critical reading practices and analyze how they thematize reading, establish reader-character parallels, lure their readers into certain kinds of reading, and comment on the dominant reading practices. In doing so, I believe I am following Renfrew’s advice to take a step back, look at interconnections and bigger structural principles, and “read reading.” Chapter 2, 1945-1963: The Reader in the Ivory Tower, examines the retreat of intellectuals into the ivory tower of the academy in the face of the momentous changes in education and culture brought about by the G.I. Bill and the rapid growth of mass culture, most prominently expressed in television and the paperback industry. In order to keep education uncontaminated, intellectuals tried to keep reading an elite affair that, especially in the case of the New Critics, literally ignored the world outside the text. The dichotomies of inside/outside and uncontaminated/contaminated are a central theme of Pynchon’s short stories of these years as well of his first novel, V. In these texts, Pynchon challenges the adequacy of such a retreat and shows that contamination is “always already” there. The next chapter, 1963-1973: The Paranoid Reader, focuses on the distinctly “paranoid” zeitgeist generated by the growing politicization of the younger generation, Cold War politics, and political assassinations. Pynchon’s characters Herbert Stencil and Oedipa Maas, from V. and The Crying of Lot 49 respectively, are prototypical “paranoid readers,” whose quests mirror not only Richard Hofstadter’s famous “paranoid style” but also Paul Ricoeur’s “hermeneutics of suspicion.” Chapter 4, 1973-1980: Reading between Doubt and Hope, explores a decade characterized by political and economic crises. In these years, which also witnessed the advance of what Christopher Lasch has termed the “culture of narcissism,” the turn towards the reader in reader-response theory appears as a

\textsuperscript{7} I am following Karin Littau’s model here. In her chapter “The Reader in Fiction,” she describes how certain contemporary reading anxieties were thematized in novels: the “tearful reader” in Goethe’s The Sufferings of Young Werther, the “frightened reader” in Austen’s Northanger Abbey, and the “passionate reader” in Flaubert’s Madame Bovary (Littau 62-82).
paradigmatic move. Another way in which the pervading sense of crisis found its way into literary interpretation is illustrated by poststructuralist theory and deconstruction. Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* not only shows a clear move beyond the paranoid reader but also offers a way to navigate through the treacherous waters of 1970s theory. The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and a resurgent conservatism provide the backdrop for the next chapter, *1980-1991: Resisting Readers. Politicization and Defensive Moves*. Globalization, multiculturalism, and technologization in everyday America were mirrored in the academy in the turn towards pragmatism and pluralism. Afraid that television and neoconservatism would turn Americans into apolitical or conservative couch potatoes, many academics adopted a defensive stance in which reading had a distinctly political function. *Vineland*’s pop cultural appeal and apparent difference in style and content from *Gravity’s Rainbow* not only illustrate the changes in the reading zeitgeist as it became increasingly clear that the age of high theory was over but also include an allegory about the lure of superficial readings. The starting point for Chapter 6, *1991-2001: Meta-readers and the Theory Mess*, is the “global disorder” in which Eric Hobsbawm saw the world after the collapse of the USSR. Reading at the academy was in similar disarray: the ongoing culture wars and the end of the heyday of “grand theory” had left critical theory in what Herman Rapaport calls the “Theory Mess.” *Mason & Dixon* reflects the bickering of various factions in both its narrative frame and its content and calls for a kind of reading that is similar to the aforementioned advice of Professor Renfrew: meta-reading. In the conclusion, *The End of Reading as We Know It?*, I will discuss the historic changes that are occurring as we have entered the digital age. For those academics who address the new age, reading becomes a symbolic act. For Luddite readers, such as Sven Birkerts, reading is a conscious turn against the new technology, while Iconoclast readers, such as George Landow, celebrate hypertext and the
freedom from the printed page. We come back full circle to Pynchon’s mammoth Against the Day, which is certainly not for readers with short attention spans and seems almost anachronistic in times of text messages, blogs, and Twitter.
CHAPTER 2
1945-1963: THE READER IN THE IVORY TOWER

a. Introduction

By now it has often been put on record that the perception of the years between the end of World War II and Kennedy’s assassination as slow paced, calm, and innocent is unproductively nostalgic and superficial.¹ We know that underneath the surface of growing prosperity and general conformity things were beginning to boil: the civil rights movement was gathering pace, the Beats explored alternative lifestyles, and Cold War anxieties and rhetoric paved the way for important events of the decades ahead. All this is widely accepted. What is often overlooked, however, is the enormous impact these years had on reading practices at the academy. The late Forties and the Fifties witnessed seismic shifts in culture and education that brought anxieties about reading and literature to the critical forefront with a new urgency. The rapidly expanding mass culture, expressed in television, paperbacks, and record enrollments in American universities led to growing concerns about reading and about the position of intellectuals in this new mass society. The postwar debates mostly revolved around the fear that undiscriminating mass readers would lower educational and cultural standards² or the fear that elite culture, while trying to maintain standards, could somehow be contaminated by mass culture. Along with metaphors of contamination, we find in the rhetoric of these years a clear distinction between

¹ For example by David Halberstam in *The Fifties* (ix). See also Young and Young, *The 1950s* (xiii).
² The conviction that mass culture means social decay has a long tradition as Patrick Brantlinger shows in his book *Bread and Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture and Social Decay*. 
highbrow and lowbrow reading. While this distinction had been around at least since Van Wyck Brooks 1915 book *America’s Coming-of-Age*, it was the particular convergence of several factors after 1945 that exacerbated fears about mass culture and anxieties about reading: mass culture had not only significantly increased in size and influence, but with the G.I. Bill the masses were also given access to universities.

The two most influential intellectual groups of the time, the New York Intellectuals and the New Critics, shared not only a rhetoric of contamination and binary opposites (high/low, mass/elite, avant-garde/kitsch), they also had in common a defensive retreat into an elitist ivory tower in the attempt both to keep high culture uncontaminated and to keep the masses under control. I consider this retreat the paradigmatic intellectual move of these years. My notion of “elitist ivory tower” requires clarification: it does not suggest that they were incognizant of the democratization of students but rather designates a specific response to it, in which “elitism” constitutes a particular educational or cultural tactic, based on the notion that an uncontaminated professional reader could be culture’s saving grace.

The dichotomy of inside and outside implied by the retreat into the ivory tower is a central concern in Pynchon’s short stories of this time, most importantly in “The Small Rain” and “Entropy.” In his first novel, *V.*, the inside/outside binary is heavily expanded into one of the central metaphors of the novel: the hothouse and the street. Taken together, these three texts clearly reflect and comment on the contemporaneous reading zeitgeist. In questioning the retreat into the ivory tower/hothouse, Pynchon’s texts serve to illustrate the younger generation’s...

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3 This prompted Dwight Macdonald to change his 1944 article “A Theory of Popular Culture” to “A Theory of Mass Culture” in 1953.
4 Thomas Hill Schaub’s account of “revisionist liberalism” during the Forties in Fifties, “when both writer and critic were in the process of renegotiating the relationship between politics and aesthetics” (*American* vii) in the attempt to “redefine liberalism and liberal hope among more realistic lines” (*American* 7), also shows that these critics were very much aware of their socio-political surroundings.
discontentment with their professors and parents which led to the 1960s rebellion and new reading practices at colleges.

b. The Street: Television, the G.I. Bill, and the Paperback Explosion

If we apply the notion of the hothouse and the street to postwar America and the societal, educational, and cultural changes with which intellectuals were confronted, the concept of the hothouse stands for the retreat from contemporary pressures and challenges and the street subsumes everything the concerned inhabitant of the hothouse hopes to keep at bay. Dwight Macdonald’s street, then, is what he calls “masscult.” Finding its origins in 18th century England, Macdonald considers “the enormous increase in the audience” around this time a major factor for the emergence of masscult (American Grain 17). No wonder, then, that postwar America frightened intellectuals. Due to the G.I. Bill, the paperback explosion, and the conquest of American living rooms by television, the years after 1945 showed an even more formidable increase in audience. The foe to be kept at bay was a mighty opponent: masses of television viewers, paperback readers, and G.I.s entering universities.

Both television and paperback publishing profited from the economic and cultural conditions after World War II: there was rising affluence in many segments of society and more time to read books or watch television. Even though there had been television broadcasts since the late Twenties, it took the postwar prosperity for television to truly catch on and turn into a mass medium. Newly built homes in planned suburbs like Levittown, NY, came prefurbished not only with washing machines but also with TV sets. The percentage of households owning at least one TV set rose from 9% in 1950 to 86% in 1959 (Young and Young 181). The nation “became wired for television” (Halberstam ix), and both the movie industry and newspaper publishers felt
the repercussions with declining sales. The images of the good life as shown in many TV ads and the strong family values portrayed in shows like *I love Lucy*, *Father knows best*, and *Leave it to Beaver* were consumed by an ever increasing audience and it did not take long until politicians discovered the power of television. Nixon’s “Checkers speech” in September 1953 was proof for many that the public’s opinion could be guided with a little help from the new medium. “The big winner in this whole episode,” remarks David Halberstam about Nixon’s speech, “was not Nixon but television. Nixon had given a powerful demonstration of what it could do” (242).

If Nixon had given a powerful demonstration what TV could do, the 1944 Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, also known as the G.I. Bill, was a powerful demonstration of what a piece of legislation could do. Few people had foreseen the impact of the bill, which led to an enormous increase in university enrollment and changed the face of higher education. Three years after its introduction, half of all college students were attending school with the help of the bill. Of the 16 million returning veterans of World War II, about 8 million used the G.I. Bill’s education benefits.\(^5\) College attendance rose from 1,676,851 students in 1945 to 3,582,726 in 1960 (Olson 44). While a college career had been something that the majority of Americans either did not consider or could not afford, the G.I. Bill opened up higher education for (literally) millions of people. In a 1948 article, Isaac L. Kandel noted, “The G.I. Bill indicated that large numbers of young men and women have been enabled to attend colleges and universities, who, because of lack of means, would have been unable to do so” (154). The bill helped not only launch the careers of numerous writers and directors\(^6\) but also created a great number of new readers. In

\(^5\) It should be noted that of the 7.8 million veterans who used the G.I. Bill’s education benefits only 2.2 million actually attended college. The remaining 5.6 million veterans used the benefits for vocational training or subcollege education (Mettler 42).

\(^6\) Edward Humes dedicates an entire chapter of his book *Over Here. How the G.I. Bill Transformed the American Dream* to the influence of the G.I. Bill on the arts. Focusing on the career of Arthur Penn, a graduate of Black Mountain College and director of *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), Humes illustrates the impact of the bill on what he calls the “twentieth-century renaissance in the arts in America” (157) and speculates that Black Mountain College, which
college, first-generation students whose parents had never gone to college or were not even able to read, were exposed to literature and turned into readers. In 1962, Macdonald observed, “This enormous college population … is the most important fact about our cultural situation today” (58). For better or worse, the academy somehow had to deal with this increased audience.

There is another connection between the G.I.s and the increase in reading audience: during World War II the Armed Service Editions of popular books were printed and sold in the millions. They not only “developed millions of readers who previously had seldom looked into a book,” as Charles Madison points out (548), but also contributed greatly to the postwar expansion of the paperback industry (Madison 548; Bonn 47). To be sure, softcover printing had existed long before World War II, even before the Civil War, but not until the 1940s did paperback publishing gain mass acceptance and a mass audience. One of the pioneers of postwar paperback publishing was Robert de Graff who founded Pocket Books with support from Simon & Schuster in 1939 and printed cheap paperback editions of, among others, Shakespeare, Emily Brontë, and Thornton Wilder. De Graff was motivated by the success of Allen Lane’s Penguin Books, which had started an American branch in 1939. Up to that point, paperback literature had been associated with poor quality and second-rate writing. Penguin, however, published authors such as Hemingway or D.H. Lawrence and made them widely available. By 1955, Pocket Books had published over 1000 titles and sold over 300 million copies. This success triggered a boom in paperback publishing. Following the example of both Penguin and Pocket Books, more and more publishing houses started their own paperback divisions and paperbacks gained a big share

closed in 1957, would “likely […] have perished much sooner if not for the G.I. Bill and the postwar influx of veterans” (170). Writers trained through the G.I. Bill include Gore Vidal, Joseph Heller, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti.
of the American market: over one third of all books sold in the US during the 1950s were paperbacks (Young and Young 135).

Reading thus became part of the mass culture—in terms of production and in terms of audience. Books were more accessible to everyone, and reading became less elitist and more affordable. Like the commodities in a supermarket, paperbacks were something that could be endlessly reproduced and consumed in massive numbers by a massive amount of readers. During the 1950s, consumerism and mass culture therefore not only affected television, suburbia, and merchandise but also the reading and production of books. Alberto Manguel, writing from the vantage point of half a century later, argues that it was this availability that made paperbacks so important. “Penguin’s greatest achievement,” he writes, “was symbolic. The knowledge that such a huge range of literature could be bought by almost anyone almost anywhere … lent readers a symbol of their own ubiquity” (144). Manguel’s positive evaluation of the paperback industry’s democratizing effect can also be seen in Madison’s enthusiastic comment about “millions of men and women, young and old, reading books for the first time since leaving school” (548).

c. Anxieties

Not everybody shared the enthusiasm of Manguel or Madison. Soon after the G.I. Bill was passed, Robert M. Hutchins, the president of the University of Chicago, wrote an article for Collier’s, expressing concern that the bill would turn universities into “hobo jungles” (21).

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7 The quality of paperbacks varied significantly. While cheap mass-market sex and crime novels continued to be published in large numbers, companies like Penguin, Vintage, and Anchor tried to publish quality titles. In 1949, the Fawcett imprint Gold Medal started printing original material. Other companies followed that model and soon more and more original titles were published as paperbacks without going through the cycle of an initial publication as hardcover. Not only writers of genre fiction profited from that marketing strategy: William S. Burroughs’s Junkie, for example, was first published as a paperback by Ace Books. In fact, as Madison point out, quality paperbacks were in high demand prompting the more serious publishing houses to print higher-priced paperback editions of literary and scholarly titles (550).
Educational institutions, he was afraid, would not be able to resist the money: “The G.I. Bill of Rights gives them a chance to get more money than they have ever dreamed of, and to do it in the name of patriotism. They will not want to keep out unqualified veterans; they will not expel those who fail” (21). For Hutchins, it was not necessarily a class question (as it was for others), but rather a worry that the influx of unqualified students going to universities because they have nothing better to do would have a negative impact on the universities’ standards. Other intellectuals were afraid that the uniformity of a mass audience now gaining access to higher education would force people into an unthinking conformity and stifle any kind of independent thinking. The debate had been brewing for a while, but the enormous numbers of new students in the years after the war aggravated these issues. Several years before the passing of the G.I. Bill, Max Horkheimer had argued that mass culture leads to a loss of imagination: “Man has lost his power to conceive a world different from that in which he lives” (qtd. in Gorman 178). This view of mass culture as encouraging unthinking conformity and complacency was shared by most intellectuals of the time. Even in the popular debate, the notion of conformity was reiterated over and over again, as shown for example in David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd*, William Whyte’s *The Organization Man*, Sloan Wilson’s *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, or in a 1951 *Time* article about the generation of 18 to 28 year-olds stating that “Today’s generation, either through fear, passivity or conviction, is ready to conform” (“Younger Generation” 50). The fear simply was that once the gates were opened to the masses and their tastes, their presence would water down standards, eliminate distinctions between highbrow and lowbrow, and have a negative impact on the intellectual culture. The underlying assumption in a lot of critics’ cases

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8 One need only think of Clement Greenberg’s 1939 article “Avant-Garde and Kitsch.”
9 One of Paul R. Gorman’s main points in *Left Intellectuals and Popular Culture in Twentieth-Century America* is that the critique of the New York Intellectuals and Macdonald “was shaped more by the social concerns of intellectuals than by their observation of entertainments” (9). Their analyses, argues Gorman, were often based on
was that the reading of quality literature would improve the cognitive abilities of the audience, encourage independent thinking, lead to social virtue, and keep education an elite affair.

The concept of universities as safe havens of a highbrow elite culture was obviously fading under the influence of the G.I. Bill. In their positive evaluation of the transformative power of the G.I. Bill, many retrospective accounts, such as Edward Humes’s *Over Here. How the G.I. Bill Transformed the American Dream*, often overlook that it was the very notion of colleges being “transformed from an elite bastion to a middle-class entitlement” (Humes 5) that was of highest importance to many intellectuals. If the elitism had to be given up in class terms, perhaps it was possible to uphold it in educational or cultural terms. A central question thus became how this was possible in the face of the masses. Macdonald saw the elite especially threatened by what he terms “midcult” in his 1962 article “Masscult and Midcult.”

Midcult is especially dangerous to High Culture, argues Macdonald, because “it presents itself as part of High Culture” (*American Grain* 37). Macdonald was afraid that the untrained eye may not be able to tell the difference. High Culture and its standards are thus contaminated, watered down, and vulgarized. Learning how to read, learning how to tell the difference between high culture and midcult, would therefore be of vital importance for the survival of high standards.

Macdonald, however, worried that maintaining elite standards “will be especially difficult in this country where the blurring of class lines, the lack of a continuous tradition and the greater facilities for the manufacturing and distribution of *Kitsch*, whether Masscult or Midcult, all work in the other direction” (*American Grain* 70).

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10 Macdonald defines Midcult as “a peculiar hybrid bred from [Masscult’s] unnatural intercourse with [High Culture] … [It] has the essential qualities of Masscult—the formula, the built-in reaction, the lack of any standard except popularity—but it decently covers them with a cultural figleaf” (37).

11 In addition, the intellectuals also had to deal with growing anti-intellectual sentiments, as Richard Hofstadter argues. Hofstadter notes that such sentiments had been part of American culture for a long time, but they have
The fear of contamination was also present in Irving Howe’s 1954 article “This Age of Conformity.” In fact, Howe described a situation in which this contamination had already taken place. Not only was public opinion dominated by conformity, but there was also a general drift toward conformism in intellectual circles. Instead of standing in opposition to the powers that be, Howe saw intellectuals becoming “tamer than ever” (12) and “enjoying a return to the bosom of the nation” (8). Like Macdonald, Howe underlined the importance of a cultural elite: “the future quality of American culture … largely depends on the survival … of precisely the kind of dedicated group that the *avant garde* has been” (29). For Howe, it was therefore of the utmost importance that intellectuals remained independent and uncontaminated. Similar to Macdonald, Howe considered this an extremely difficult act in postwar society in which, as he notes, “[e]very current of the *Zeitgeist*, every imprint of social power, every assumption of contemporary American life favors the safe and comforting patterns of middlebrow feeling” (31). Intellectuals, wrote Howe in closing, should strive to be “committed yet dispassionate, ready to stand alone, curious, eager, skeptical” (33). What he thus envisioned as a saving grace of cultural standards was a kind of professional reader standing apart from society.

Another set of anxieties related to the ones above revolved around questions of how readers could be trained to discern between highbrow and middlebrow or how the masses could be made to appreciate High Culture. Macdonald’s early writings portray the masses as passive victims of degraded entertainment who could be made to appreciate higher standards if they were only led onto the right path—by him or other intellectuals. By the time he published “Masscult...
and Midcult,” however, Macdonald had grown increasingly skeptical about the feasibility of this plan. As he notes in the preface of *Against the American Grain*, he had more or less given up on the hope of being able to integrate the masses into high culture, that is, to somehow control their tastes (x). In “Masscult and Midcult,” he describes both phenomena—masscult and midcult—as a “reciprocating engine” which “shows no sign of running down” (*American Grain* 71-72). The image of a machine that cannot be stopped not only anticipates Pynchon’s preoccupation with entropic decline in a closed system but also neatly sums up the intellectual’s helplessness before the masses.

In his book *New Criticism in the United States*, R.P. Blackmur betrays a similar helplessness. Describing the postwar academic situation, he writes: “We have an enormous increase in potential or acquired audience but also a diminution, relatively if not absolutely, in the means of reaching let alone controlling that audience” (6-7). The sheer number of readers, of television sets, of new college students, and of paperback books thus created two specters that terrified New York Intellectuals and New Critics alike: undiscriminating mass readers contaminating high standards and reading anarchy (unruly, unstandardized, and un-intellectual), both of which, they feared, would lead to cultural decline.

d. The Hothouse: Retreat into the Ivory Tower

Despite their quarrels, the reaction of both the New York Intellectuals and the New Critics in the face of the onslaught of the masses is strikingly similar: the retreat into the metaphorical ivory tower. This retreat took many forms—it oscillated between, on the one hand, attempting the Sisyphean task of controlling the reading habits and tastes of the masses, of saving them from the street and drawing them into the ivory tower as well, and, on the other
hand, the complete withdrawal into highbrow elitism. What the various versions of the retreat have in common, however, is explained by the hothouse metaphor: it is a space that is hermetically sealed off and thus remains uncontaminated, it can be controlled, and its clear demarcation of inside and outside betrays a dualist mentality and inherent elitism. In each case, the retreat into the ivory tower was a conscious attempt to keep High Culture uncontaminated.

Lionel Trilling’s description of literature in his 1950 book *The Liberal Imagination* is a good example for elitist notions of literature. For Triling, the reading of literature has an important political function and must therefore be kept uncontaminated. He states his specific goal of saving liberalism in the preface to *The Liberal Imagination*, in which he describes a cultural criticism with a political aim: “a criticism which has at heart the interests of liberalism,” he writes, would be best off to “[put] under some pressure the liberal ideas and assumptions of the present time” (x). Trilling emphasizes liberals’ need for self-examination in order “to keep [their] ideas from becoming stale, habitual, and inert” (x). In Trilling’s view, liberalism has a tendency not only to be too dry and prosaic but also to simplify matters, which needs to be countered with an “awareness of complexity and difficulty” (xv). Since Trilling sees literature as “the human activity that takes into the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty,” he attributes to it “unique relevance” (xv) in the project of restoring liberalism. The perceived variousness and complexity of literature thus can become the saving grace for a liberalism in crisis. As the examples in *The Liberal Imagination* show, Trilling, when talking about complexity and difficulty, certainly has in mind a highbrow literature, a literature that is both challenging and elite. Since reading fulfills an important political function, Trilling believes that it must be kept a highbrow affair.

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14 See also Schaub, who notes that the attempts to preserve high culture from contamination with mass culture betrayed the new liberalism’s “class bias and implicit elitism” (*American* 18).
Macdonald is even more explicitly elitist. His postwar career, as mentioned before, marks a shift from hoping the masses could be integrated into high culture to the conviction that the coexistence of two separate spheres of High Culture and Masscult/Midcult would be the best solution. “What is to be done?” asks Macdonald at the end of “Masscult and Midcult” (American Grain 69) and notes that, between liberal and conservative solutions, he leans more towards a conservative restoration of old class lines—with the difference that the line would be cultural rather than social, political, or economic (70). While he sees hope in the divisibility of the mass audience—perhaps small parts off the masses will insist on higher standards and thus set themselves off “not only from the Masscult depths but also from the agreeable ooze of the Midcult swamp” (74)—in the end, Macdonald returns to the acknowledgement that “two cultures have developed in this country” (72) and writes, “So let the masses have their Masscult, let the few who care about good writing, painting, music, architecture, philosophy, etc., have their High Culture, and don’t fuzz up the distinction with Midcult” (73). After initially hoping to be able to lead the masses to better tastes, Macdonald has withdrawn into the hothouse keeping the contaminating “ooze” outside.

The other dominant critical force of the years after World War II, the New Critics, took on a much more active and prescriptive role in the standardization of reading practices. By the 1950s, the New Criticism had become the status quo at the academy and the question of how to control the audience had developed into a matter of utmost importance. Despite all differences

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15 This shift can be seen in his articles “A Theory of Popular Culture” (1944), “A Theory of Mass Culture” (1953) and “Masscult and Midcult” (1960).
16 Harold Rosenberg, in The Tradition of the New, considers the many critiques of mass culture “intellectualization of kitsch” (260) that are sometimes dangerously close to being kitsch themselves while also contributing to the force of the popular media. In reaction to Macdonald, he writes: “In practice the counterconcept to kitsch is more kitsch. When MacDonald speaks against kitsch he seems to be speaking from the point of view of art; when he speaks about art it is plain his ideas are kitsch” (263). If the best course of action is to stay away from kitsch altogether, this of course also shows a retreat from the masses.
17 Macdonald’s mentioning of “two cultures” immediately brings to mind C.P. Snow’s The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution, in which he criticizes that the intellectuals kept much more outside than midcult ooze.
from the New York group, the practice of close reading, along with the famously apolitical, though often debated\(^\text{18}\) stance of the New Critics, shows a similar retreat in the face of the masses.

The systematization of reading was a necessary prerequisite for the teaching of standards.\(^\text{19}\) The exclusion of all extrinsic factors in interpretation was a first step in attempting to somehow control the anarchic reading practices of the new masses coming into universities. In “Criticism, Inc.” John Crowe Ransom calls for a “more scientific, or precise and systematic” criticism (587) and makes clear what he believes should be excluded from the critical act: “declarations of the effect of the art-work upon the critic” (597), synopsis and paraphrase, historical studies, linguistic studies, and moral studies (598-99). Ransom’s insistence that the effect of the text on the reader has nothing to do with criticism, a notion that is more famously expressed in Wimsatt and Beardsley’s “affective fallacy,” is a clear attempt to keep uncontrollable factors at bay.

In order to control the uncontrollable, the audience had to be taught to become good readers. The ideal reader, as envisioned for example by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren in *Understanding Fiction*, is “mature and thoughtful” (xv)—a reader that has internalized the New Critical practice of close reading. The underlying notion is that one could learn how to read properly: the (high) standards, it was hoped, could be taught at universities. The readers thus could be trained, shaped according to the New Critical ideal, and, more importantly, controlled. It was hoped, of course, that this control could be exerted through the imposition of the strict

\(^{18}\) See for example Mark Jancovich’s book *The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism*, in which he challenges the notion that the New Criticism was ahistorical and asocial: “…the New Critics did not define the text as a fixed object which was completely autonomous from the contexts within which it was produced and consumed. On the contrary, they recognized that the production and consumption of texts were only moments within broader cultural processes” (5).

\(^{19}\) Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* and Wayne Booth’s *The Rhetoric of Fiction* are other such attempts at systematization.
protocols of close reading. For the New Critics, reading and interpretation were an elite affair, abilities that had to be acquired at universities. Close reading, once internalized by a large body of students, would hopefully prevent the masses from contaminating education.

In addition, Brooks and Warren express their belief that the New Critical way of reading is the best way to bring a student “to an appreciation of the more broadly human values implicit in fiction” (x). The importance of literature that Trilling emphasized in *The Liberal Imagination*, is also reiterated here. The notion of “human values” hints at the conviction that the audience would somehow be made better through (good) literature—and the right way to read this literature. Again, literature becomes a remedy against the mind-numbing forces of mass culture.

The formalist approach is thus another attempt to keep the masses at bay. The effort to systematize not only reading but also the teaching of reading was meant to subdue individualistic and “anarchical” reading practices, to keep in check any distracting and uncontrollable factors, and to maintain high standards. Close reading and its sole focus on the text, in which all contradictions and tensions are resolved into one organic whole with its various

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20 Vincent Leitch’s 16-step program of a close reading in *American Literary Criticism from the Thirties to the Eighties* goes as follows:

1. Select a short text, often a metaphysical or modern poem;
2. rule out “genetic” critical approaches;
3. avoid “receptionist” inquiry;
4. assume the text to be an autonomous, ahistorical, spatial object;
5. presuppose the text to be both intricate and complex and efficient and unified;
6. carry out multiple retrospective readings;
7. conceive each text as a drama of conflicting forces;
8. focus continually on the text and its manifold semantic and rhetorical interrelations;
9. insist on the fundamentally metaphorical and therefore miraculous powers of literary language;
10. eschew paraphrase and summary or make clear that such statements are not equivalent to poetic meaning;
11. seek an overall balanced or unified comprehensive structure of harmonized textual elements;
12. subordinate incongruities and conflicts;
13. see paradox, ambiguity, and irony as subduing divergences and insuring unifying structure;
14. treat (intrinsic) meaning as just one element of structure;
15. note in passing cognitive, experiential dimensions of the text; and
16. try to be the ideal reader and create the one, true reading, which subsumes multiple readings. (Leitch, *Criticism* 35)

21 Commenting on the informal organization of the group, Jancovich notes that New Criticism “only began to formalize itself in an attempt to reorganize the teaching of English in America” (3). See also Birkerts, who notes that the institutionalization of literary studies required its justification as a science. As a result, “the academic pursuit of literature became pledged to formalism. By adopting strict and teachable modes of close reading, the professoriat was able to sell its discipline as one subject to sound methodological procedures” (186).
elements in balance, leaves the uncertainties of real life outside and therefore marks another
retreat into an intellectual ivory tower that avoided facing the anarchy outside of its walls.

e. Readers in Retreat: “The Small Rain” and “Entropy”

A conspicuous feature of Pynchon’s short stories is that three of the five stories collected
in *Slow Learner* start with the description of a scene external to the protagonist’s present
location. “The Small Rain” starts with, “Outside, the company area broiled slowly under the sun”
(27), “Entropy” with, “Downstairs, Meatball Mulligan’s lease-breaking party was moving into its
40th hour” (81), and “The Secret Integration” with, “Outside it was raining …” (141). Since the
counterpart to Mulligan’s “downstairs” in “Entropy” is a hermetically sealed hothouse, we find
that each of these stories establishes an inside-outside dichotomy from the very beginning. The
main characters of these stories, Nathan Levine, Callisto, and Tim Santora, respectively, each
inhabit their own secluded area, separated from the heat, chaos, or rain outside. In “The Small
Rain” and “Entropy” the main protagonists are, furthermore, explicitly described as readers:22
Levine is reading a cheap paperback as the story opens (Pynchon, SR 27) and Callisto, by
contrast, not only discusses Henry Adams and various physicists (Pynchon, En 84-87) but also
refers to William Faulkner, Djuna Barnes, and Henry Miller (Pynchon, En 93). Significantly, we
thus find in these two texts readers who are separated, to different degrees, from their
surroundings. The stories of Levine, a serviceman stationed in Louisiana in 1957 who comes to a
turning point in his army career, and of Callisto, who has shut himself off from the outside world
and whose hermetic retreat is contrasted with the chaos of Mulligan’s party downstairs, can not
only be read as comments on the reader in the ivory tower but also as a challenge aimed at their
readers to “move outside the text.” While Pynchon’s short stories “have been dismissed as

22 I will therefore concentrate on these two stories and skip “The Secret Integration.”
apprentice work” as J. Kerry Grant remarks (Lot 49 xi), both “The Small Rain” and “Entropy” anticipate and illuminate important aspects of V.

Stationed in Fort Roach, Louisiana, and made indolent by daily routine, Nathan Levine, as we encounter him at the beginning of “The Small Rain,” possesses all the ingredients for the nightmare of the High Culture defenders: he is a serviceman, he is reading a cheap paperback, and he is listening to rock’n’roll music. In short, he is a creature of mass culture. As such, he is contrasted with Rizzo, “the company intellectual” (Pynchon, SR 36) who talks about Hemingway and Eliot and reads R.P. Blackmur’s *Form and Value in Modern Poetry*. There is a clear line separating highbrow and lowbrow: Rizzo, New Criticism, and highbrow literature on one side, and Levine and the rest of their company with their “westerns, sex novels and whodunits” (Pynchon, SR 36) on the other side. Levine’s reading habits are distinctly different from the practices the New Critics attempted to instill in their students. Not only is his choice of reading material (*Swamp Wench*) decidedly lowbrow, the motivation behind his reading reveals a similarly anti-intellectual impulse. For Levine reading is not an activity which leads to intellectual reflection but rather an escape: from the daily routine, for example, but also more literally from unwanted work or duties. This is made clear early in the story when the company clerk Dugan interrupts Levine’s idle day and tells him that the lieutenant wants to see him. Annoyed by Dugan, Levine repeatedly picks up his paperback and ostentatiously flips through the pages (Pynchon, SR 29). That the book is a rather profane everyday object for him is also shown in the way he handles it: on his way to the lieutenant, he “[folds] it in half … and [sticks] it in his back pocket” (Pynchon, SR 30). Far from treating books as a revered object for study, Levine is what highbrow readers consider a “deculturated reader.”

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23 Armando Petrucci uses this term in his article “Reading to Read. A Future for Reading” (362).
Significantly, the mass cultural pull of the army has made him that way. The opening scene shows life in the army as a closed circuit, another hothouse perhaps, even though not an intellectual one. Daily life in Fort Roach is uniform and monotonous. Levine is lazy and unmotivated, but enjoys his life at the fort. Since he arrived there, he has let himself go physically and intellectually. He has grown a “fine beer belly,” and his Bronx accent has changed “into a modified drawl” (Pynchon, SR 28). The leveling forces of the army have not only changed his speech and appearance, they also turned the CCNY graduate into someone who almost denies his college past. For Levine, Rizzo, with his highbrow books and intellectual talk, is something to sneer at. Even his lieutenant tells Levine that he is wasting himself: “Here you are, college graduate, highest IQ in the damn battalion, and what are you doing. Sitting here in the most wretched pesthole in the armed forces, on an ass that gets broader every month” (Pynchon, SR 33).

Not until the central event of the story, the army’s rescue efforts in a hurricane-stricken village in southern Louisiana, is Levine awakened from his lethargy. His experience in the village is a decisive moment for Levine, who has something of an epiphany. Stationed, significantly, on a college campus, Levine’s allegiance at first still clearly lies with his battalion. When a female college student introduces herself as little Buttercup, thus alluding to a character in an operetta by Arthur Sullivan and W.S. Gilbert, Levine, who does not let on whether or not he recognizes the allusion, suggests she should play “Spot This Quote” with Rizzo. Levine thus draws a line between himself and his army buddy: Rizzo is the “college kid” (Pynchon, SR 43), while Levine is not. In Levine’s view, life in the army is real, whereas college is a separate world, narrow in focus and shut-off from the real world. He tells Rizzo that he believes college is a closed circuit: “Everybody [is] on the same frequency. And after a while you forget about the
rest of the spectrum and start believing that this is the only frequency that counts or is real. While outside, all up and down the land, there are these wonderful colors and x-rays and ultravioletsgoing on” (Pynchon, SR 42). Levine considers college a hothouse: inside the college walls, according to him, one is shut off from all the things going on outside. Levine has seen this outside world. He has experienced what Pynchon describes in the introduction to Slow Learner: during the 1950s, writes Pynchon, “all these alternative lowlife data … kept filtering insidiously through the ivy,” giving young students “a sense of that other world humming along out there” (8). After getting a taste of life outside, Levine has come to view college as an ivory tower, out of touch with reality.

What begins to dawn on him, however, is that the army itself constitutes another “inside.” Rizzo rightly points out that “Roach ain’t the spectrum either” (Pynchon, SR 42). Levine brushes aside Rizzo’s comment at first, but nonetheless begins to anticipate “some radical change” (Pynchon, SR 43) in himself. He leaves his battalion to help with the rescue efforts. Away from his company, it is once again this “outside” perspective which helps him to get a new look at the inside. Eventually, he realizes that he is trapped in merely another closed circuit. Levine’s epiphany while he is working on a tug looking for corpses constitutes an Emersonian moment. What happens to Levine can be compared to Emerson’s insistence in “The American Scholar” on the need for “Man Thinking” to go out and experience life: “The world … lies wide around. Its attractions are the keys which unlock my thoughts and make me acquainted with myself. I launch eagerly into this resounding tumult. I grasp the hands of those next me, and take my place in the ring to suffer and to work, taught by an instinct that so shall the dumb abyss be vocal with speech” (1143). This impress of the surrounding and resounding world is what Levine comes to feel. As if by instinct—he recognizes that “the situation did not require thought or
rationalization” (Pynchon, *SR* 48)—the manual labor, the “resounding tumult,” unlocks his thoughts and re-acquaints him with himself.

The book *Swamp Wench* comes to symbolize Levine’s change. When Levine returns from his first trip to the disaster area, one of his company mates is reading the paperback. He continues what Levine had been doing, while Levine has moved on. For the company, nothing has changed. They still lie around reading trashy novels. Levine, however, has spent that time working outside. His giving up reading *Swamp Wench* underscores the fact that he has left the hothouse of the army. When he accidentally wakes up Rizzo the next night, Levine reassures him, “Why it’s good old reliable Nathan” (Pynchon, *SR* 48), but it is clear that it is not the old Nathan Levine.

This, however, does not mean that he will return to university. Despite the “curious empathy” (Pynchon, *SR* 42) with Rizzo, which indicates a rediscovery of his college past, a simple return is not possible for Levine. His encounter with Buttercup towards the end of the story makes this clear. Buttercup is associated with several things that have to do with “inside”—with retreat and removedness from life: first, she leads Levine to a dilapidated cabin in the swamps. Surrounded by mangrove, moss, and “a savage chorus” of frogs (Pynchon, *SR* 50), and cut off from their surroundings, Levine’s sexual encounter with Buttercup has an otherworldly feel and constitutes a retreat from reality. Buttercup quite literally becomes the “swamp wench”—something that Levine had already given up on. Not only has he quit reading the book *Swamp Wench*, it also becomes clear that he has found relief in the reality of relief work rather than in sex with Buttercup. Second, and more importantly, he realizes her narrow mindedness. Buttercup’s reaction to the hurricane is merely “At least it didn’t do anything to the college” (Pynchon, *SR* 49). After his experiences in the disaster area, Levine cannot help but notice the
cynicism and ignorance of this statement. When on top of all that it turns out that Buttercup has
the same accent as the company clerk Dugan, who could be considered a metonym for the closed
world of the army, Levine cannot help but realize that despite the different surroundings both
Buttercup and Dugan are similarly locked inside their worlds. In the end, Buttercup is perhaps a
character much more worrisome than Levine: in Levine’s encounter with her one may not only
detect echoes of Macdonald’s notion of “the ooze of Midcult swamp” (74), but she also is a clear
failure in terms of Brooks and Warren’s pretension to teach human values.

The story closes with Levine falling asleep on the way back to Fort Roach. From a
remark Levine makes to Rizzo, we can infer, however, that something will change. Rain, Levine
says, “can stir dull roots; it can rip them up, wash them away” (Pynchon, SR 51). Levine’s own
“dull roots” in the army have been ripped up by the hurricane. His hothouse has been breached
and maybe he will be washed away. In the end, Levine has recognized both college and the army
as closed circuits. “Entropy” and V. take this metaphor further and illustrate that such closed
circuits are subject to entropic decline and ultimately lead to stagnation and death.

Callisto’s retreat into his hermetically sealed hothouse in “Entropy” is perhaps the most
obvious expression of the reader in the ivory tower in all of Pynchon’s work. The connection
between the hothouse and stagnation hinted at in “The Small Rain” is given a “scientific basis”
in “Entropy”—although Pynchon wryly admits in the introduction to Slow Learner: “people
think I know more about the subject of entropy than I really do” (12). Pynchon’s comment
notwithstanding, the story marks the starting point for an important connection between closed
systems and entropic decline which informs large parts of Pynchon’s subsequent work.

After a description of the festivities of Callisto’s downstairs neighbor Mulligan’s lease-
breaking party, the story shifts to Callisto in his sealed off apartment, thus establishing the
contrast of chaos and order, outside and inside, or, if you want, street and hothouse, early on. Callisto has been attempting for several days to transfer his body heat to a sick bird in order to restore its health. He has become obsessed with theories of entropy, according to which a closed system will eventually run out of free energy. Applied to the universe, this will lead to its eventual heat-death. The final state in this scenario, the state of maximum entropy, will be one in which all life and motion will cease. Callisto describes it as “something like Limbo: form and motion abolished, heat-energy identical at every point in it” (Pynchon, En 85). If the transfer of heat or energy in a closed system will eventually lead to a state of equilibrium, Callisto believes that he should be able to transfer some of his energy to the bird, thus somehow controlling entropy and restoring life and motion. At the same time, the notion of equilibrium has him worried about the fact that despite weather changes the temperature has stayed at 37 degrees for the past three days. Callisto is certainly aware that 37 degrees has nothing to do with the actual heat-death of the universe—rather, the constant temperature reiterates for him the existence of entropic symptoms outside of his apartment: cultural decline, intellectual stagnation, disorder, and death. His retreat from the outside world is therefore mainly an intellectual one. His hothouse is a “tiny enclave of regularity in the city’s chaos” (Pynchon, En 85).

This enclave is something that he hopes to be able to control. He is not the only one with such concerns in the story. Other characters in “Entropy” are equally anxious about control. This can be seen, for example, in Mulligan’s attempts downstairs to restore order at his anarchical party or in one of Mulligan’s guest’s worries about controlling meaning in communication.

24 In this state of maximum entropy, the temperature of the universe would be close to absolute zero, or about -459 degrees Fahrenheit In Slow Learner, Pynchon notes that he “chose 37 degrees Fahrenheit for an equilibrium point because 37 degrees Celsius is the temperature of the human body” (13).
25 Party guest Saul tells Mulligan: “Tell a girl: ‘I love you.’ No trouble with two-thirds of that, it’s a closed circuit. Just you and she. But that nasty four-letter word in the middle, that’s the one you have to look out for” (Pynchon, En 90).
What Callisto attempts to keep at bay are “the vagaries of the weather, of national politics, of any civil disorder” (Pynchon, *En* 83-84). Like the New Critics and New York Intellectuals, he is afraid of forces outside his control. His fear of contamination has driven him into an ivory tower. His main concern lies with the application of the notion of heat-death to culture. Callisto “envision[s] a heat-death for his culture in which ideas, like heat-energy, would no longer be transferred, since each point in it would ultimately have the same quantity of energy; and intellectual motion would, accordingly, cease” (Pynchon, *En* 88-89). His highbrow tastes suggest that he is leery of the mass culture outside. The notion of the intellectual heat-death corresponds to Hutchinson’s fear of the “hobo jungles,” Trilling’s warning about a “stale, habitual, and inert” liberalism, or to Macdonald’s “reciprocating engine.”

At the end of the story, the bird Callisto had been trying to restore to health dies. Its death suggests two things: first, not even in his hermetically sealed enclave is Callisto able to control his surroundings. Second, it exposes the hothouse as a naïve fantasy. The inside is just as much subject to entropic processes as the outside. This realization leaves Callisto terrified and unable to act. It is his wife Aubade who reacts first: she breaks a window and puts an end to Callisto’s withdrawal. Like Levine in “The Small Rain,” she challenges the retreat into the ivory tower. Her function as a figure to question Callisto’s motives is hinted at early on in the story: she lies next to him “like a tawny question mark” (Pynchon, *En* 84). When the bird dies, she realizes that Callisto’s notion of inside and outside (heat-death and chaos outside; life and intellectual stimulation inside) is all wrong. Their hothouse, not the outside, means death and stagnation. Her smashing the window is an admittance of the outside world, an embracing of life in all its randomness and weirdness (as suggested by the other half of the story focusing on Meatball Mulligan’s party marathon), which is preferable, Aubade realizes, to Callisto’s being caught up
in theories far removed from actual life. The somewhat enigmatic end, which has Callisto and Aubade waiting “until the moment of equilibrium was reached, when 37 degrees Fahrenheit should prevail both outside and inside, and forever, and the hovering, curious dominant of their separate lives should resolve into a tonic of darkness and the final absence of all motion” (Pynchon, En 98), not only shows Callisto’s terror at his losing control over his surroundings but may also suggest, as Patrick Hurley believes, that Aubade will leave him.26

Applied to the intellectual climate and reading habits of the time, the critique of closed systems and the withdrawal from life in “The Small Rain” and “Entropy” suggests that the general intellectual retreat from the masses and the practice of close reading in its focus on the text alone, which similarly constitute closed systems, are doomed to stagnation or failure. In addition to the apparent thematic critique of intellectual retreat, both stories are also early examples for the interpellative function of Pynchon’s work: they continually “point outward” and force the reader to move outside the text. The references to T.S. Eliot, Hemingway, the Bible, and TV shows, along with the use of army slang in “The Small Rain,” find analogy, in “Entropy,” in allusions to Henry Miller, Henry Adams, or jazz music, and in all its thermodynamic talk. This juxtaposition of highbrow and lowbrow culture, as well as of literary and scientific allusions, is not only a direct challenge to elitist notions of literature, but also illustrates what C.P. Snow has described in The Two Cultures as the “gulf of mutual incomprehension” (par. 88) between the sciences and the humanities.27 Especially “Entropy”

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26 Hurley points out that an aubade is a poem about lovers separating at dawn, and notes that Aubade’s name and the image of “the tonic of darkness and the final absence of all motion” in the very last sentence of “Entropy” suggest the “inevitable and permanent separation” of the two (18).

27 It is interesting to note that Snow specifically mentions thermodynamics when talking about “literary persons” (par. 108):

As with the tone-deaf, they don’t know what they miss. They give a pitying chuckle at the news of scientists who have never read a major work of English literature. They dismiss them as ignorant specialists. Yet their own ignorance and their own specialisation is just as startling. A good many times I have been present at gatherings of people who, by the standards of the traditional culture,
forces literary theorists to bridge this gap and to look up theories of Gibbs, Clausius, or Boltzmann—and, perhaps, along the way familiarize themselves with 1950s pop culture. In the process, they leave the ivory tower of literary high culture not only in the sense of acknowledging the sciences and lowbrow or middlebrow culture, but also in the sense of moving outside of the text—contrary to close reading protocols.

f. Streets and Hothouses: Pynchon’s V.

Both this “pointing outward” and the inside/outside dichotomy reach their fullest development in V. The association of the hothouse with stagnation and death which Aubade exposes in “Entropy” becomes a core element in Pynchon’s first novel, in which any retreat into a hermetic hothouse—be it literal or metaphorical—has negative connotations. The image of the hothouse, most clearly elaborated in Foppl’s Siege Party (in Chapter Nine), in “Confessions of Fausto Majstral” (Chapter Eleven), and in Sidney Stencil’s rekindled affair with Veronica Manganese (in the Epilogue), is always connected with death. In all cases, the inhabitants of the hothouse see themselves under siege and their retreat is nostalgic, conservative, caught up in the past, and removed from life. Like Callisto, who retreats from the perceived chaos and contamination outside only to be confronted with death inside the hothouse, the occupants of the

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Note also that Pynchon refers to Snow’s text in “Is It O.K. to Be a Luddite?” arguing that in 1984 (when Pynchon’s article was published) “nobody could get away with such a distinction [between ‘scientific’ and ‘literary’ factions]” (1). Pynchon adds, “Anybody with the time, literacy and access fee these days can get together with just about any piece of specialized knowledge s/he may need. So, to that extent, the two-cultures quarrel can no longer be sustained” (1).
hothouse in V. attempt to stay uncontaminated from the outside, yet are faced with inertia, decadence, or death.

Let us first take a quick look at the outside, at “the street.” The hothouse/street dichotomy is most clearly expressed towards the end of the novel in one of Sidney Stencil’s journal entries: “we carry on the business of this century with an intolerable double vision. Right and Left; the hothouse and the street. The Right can only live and work hermetically, in the hothouse of the past, while outside the Left prosecute their affairs in the streets by manipulated mob violence. And cannot live but in the dreamscape of the future” (506). Several important themes are brought together here. The hothouse is associated with the past, nostalgia, and conservatism, and the street is associated with violence, change, randomness, and the movement towards an unknown future. Stencil’s mentioning of “the business of this century” furthermore echoes Fausto Maijstral’s description of “[t]he street of the 20th Century, at whose far end or turning—we hope—is some sense of home or safety” (Pynchon, V. 347). This street, then, is the world of most of the characters in the novel, of Pig Bodine, Profane’s Navy friend gone AWOL, of Signor Mantissa, who tries to steal Botticelli’s Birth of Venus, and of Fergus Mixolydian, the Irish Armenian Jew who has a sleep-switch for his TV set implanted in his forearm. The street is also the scene of violence: the Bondelswaartz rebellion in South-West Africa, mob violence in Florence, the June Disturbances in Malta, and the two World Wars. The streets thus depict the (entropic) decline into the inanimate, into non-humanity, or death, and illustrate, as Callisto suspects in “Entropy,” that “things are going to get worse before they get better” (87).

Significantly, the one character who is most clearly associated with the street, Benny Profane, the traveling schlemihl and “human yo-yo” (Pynchon, V. 1), has nightmares about his

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28 Another major motif of the novel: it can not only be seen in the downward spiral of Fashoda Crisis, World War I, Bondelswaartz rebellion, and World War II, but also in Fausto Maijstral, various members of the Whole Sick Crew, and in the successive impersonations of V., incorporating more and more artificial parts into her body.

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decline into the inanimate: “if he kept going down that street, not only his ass but also his arms, legs, sponge brain and clock of a heart must be left behind to litter the pavement” (Pynchon, V. 35). Profane’s street (dreamed and real) is full of accidents and randomness, of mass culture, and of miscommunication. Meatball Mulligan’s party guest Saul’s fear in “Entropy” that “[n]oise screws up your signal,” and that ambiguity, redundancy, and irrelevance make communication impossible (90-91), is affirmed by the continual failure of communication in Profane’s story: he gives up “trying to decode” Paola (Pynchon, V. 11), experiences “about 10 per cent communication” with Spanish-speaking musicians (139), is distracted by the noise during a phone conversation with Rachel (321), and speaks to Rachel around a toothbrush so that “neither could understand the words” (412).²⁹ In short, all of this is exactly what Callisto attempts to keep at bay in “Entropy.” In V., with the exception of Foppl’s Siege Party, the retreat into the hothouse designates less an actual move than rather a state of mind: obsessive, nostalgic, inert. Let’s take a closer look.

Foppl’s Siege Party during the 1922 Bondelswaartz rebellion in South-West Africa, the most literal retreat from the outside in the novel, clearly echoes Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death,” and therefore establishes the connection of hermetic retreat and death from the very beginning. Foppl’s announcement, “There is more than enough food, good wine, music and … beautiful women. To hell with them out there. Let them have their war. In here we shall hold Fasching” (Pynchon, V. 248), brings to mind Poe’s description of Prince Prospero’s attempt to seal himself off from the plague: “There were buffoons, there were improvisatori, there were ballet dancers, there were musicians, there were cards, there was Beauty, there was wine. All these and security were within. Without was the ‘Red Death’” (1585). In Poe’s story, the outside

²⁹ Other characters experience similar things. See for example Fausto who writes about his wife, “She cannot read my poetry and I cannot translate it for her” (Pynchon, V. 329), or Eigenvalue and Stencil’s “complete failure of communication” (Pynchon, V. 456).
literally means contamination and death, which corresponds in V. to Foppl’s perception of South-West Africa as the “Kingdom of Death” (290). The apparent connection between Foppl’s “eternal Fasching” (Pynchon, V. 243) and Prospero’s masked ball, which ends in “Darkness and Decay and the Red Death” (Poe 1589), does not bode well for the Siege Party. It does not come as a surprise that Kurt Mondaugen, the focal character of the chapter, sees the party degenerate into dream (Pynchon, V. 267, 270, 274), phantasmagoria (Pynchon, V. 276), and death.

Just like Prospero’s masked ball, Foppl’s party is a cynical retreat into decadence and nostalgia, in which the outside and the present tense are bracketed. The past becomes a revered icon: Foppl and others long for the “days of von Trotha” (Pynchon, V. 246) when everything was better. Mondaugen not only feels “nostalgia [being] forced on him” (Pynchon, V. 276), but also watches the party turn increasingly decadent: “In the last weeks of Mondaugen’s stay everyone remained in the house … Easily a third of their number were bedridden: several … had died. It had become an amusement to visit an invalid each night to feed him wine and arouse him sexually” (Pynchon, V. 294). Even more clearly than in “The Small Rain” or “Entropy,” the closed system here is associated with inertia, decadence, and death.

The piercing laugh of the hyena, a messenger of death reminiscent of Hemingway’s “The Snows of Kilimanjaro,” whose sound penetrates the walls and cannot be kept outside, shows that just as the Red Death eventually breaches the hermetically sealed castle in Poe’s story, Foppl and his guests cannot keep the inside and outside separate. Similar to “The Masque of the Red Death,” and “Entropy,” the sealed hothouse is just as much subject to decline as the outside against which its inhabitants built it in the first place.

The hothouse metaphor is picked up again in the chapter “Confessions of Fausto Maijstral,” in which Fausto describes his life as a succession of identities (Pynchon, V. 326), thus

30 Lothar von Trotha exterminated 80% of South-West Africa’s Herero population between 1904 and 1910.
echoing Stencil’s “impersonations” in Chapter III. Looking back on his life from before 1938 to the time he is writing his confessions (1956), Fausto distinguishes between four different personalities. Under the impression of World War II, Fausto sees in himself a decline into nostalgia, decadence, and the inanimate. “Fausto III,” he writes, “had taken on much of the non-humanity of the debris, crushed stone, broken masonry, destroyed churches and auberges of his city” (Pynchon, V. 327). What is never mentioned verbatim in “Mondaugen’s Story” is explicitly expressed in Fausto’s confessions: he equals the hothouse with nostalgia, the past, obsession, decadence, and death. The combination of Fausto’s use of the hothouse metaphor at the very beginning of the chapter and his description of the succession of identities from Fausto I to Fausto III as a decline into non-humanity makes clear that, once again, we come across a discussion of entropic decline in a closed system. Even though Fausto claims that there is no continuity or logic to “the separate stages of his own history” (355), his comment that decadence is “a clear movement toward death” (344) establishes such a logic via a continuum of decreasing states of vitality: retreat, decadence, and death—which of course adequately describes what happens at Foppl’s Siege Party.

Fausto’s description of his room as a hothouse in the beginning of his confessions makes clear that he uses the metaphor to designate a nostalgic and unproductive retreat into the past. He writes that his room “is the past, though it has no history of its own” (Pynchon, V. 325). The air of timelessness and nostalgia that Mondaugen describes in Chapter Nine is therefore echoed throughout Fausto’s chapter. He writes, for example, in his journal, “But when the bombs fall,

31 Fausto I, the poet who went to university; Fausto II, father and witness of the beginning world war; Fausto III, widower and witness of the disassembly of the Bad Priest; and Fausto IV, the “man of letters” (Pynchon, V. 327) and author of the “Confessions.”

32 Death in Fausto’s chapter is represented by his wife Elena’s death during the air raids, the disassembly of the Bad Priest, and, if we follow Peter Serracino Inglott (40), the connection between Fausto’s confessions and Ulysses’s necromancy in Book 11 of the Odyssey.
then it’s as if time were suspended” (Pynchon, V. 338). During the air raids of World War II, Fausto observes not only in himself but also in his friend Dnubietna a nostalgic withdrawal into a time that never was, a “[r]etreat into a time when personal combat was more equal, when warfare could at least be gilded with an illusion of honour” (Pynchon, V. 338). As in Mondaugen’s story, we find a correlation of retreat and nostalgia. The notion that making an icon of the past happens at the expense of the present is reiterated when Fausto calls Stencil’s quest for V. an obsession. To Fausto, Stencil “seemed more unaware each day … of what was happening in the rest of the world” (Pynchon, V. 483). Made aware through his own experiences, Fausto knows that it is only a small step from nostalgia and iconization of the past to an obsession. We can make an important connection with “Entropy” here: both Fausto and Aubade explicitly connect the hothouse and obsession—although they differ slightly in their estimations: Fausto portrays obsession as a hothouse (Pynchon, V. 483), while Aubade realizes that Callisto’s withdrawal into the hothouse is an obsession (Pynchon, “Entropy” 98). Furthermore, Fausto’s description of Stencil’s quest as a hothouse strikingly sounds like Callisto’s artificial retreat: “constant temperature, windless, too crowded with parti-colored sports, unnatural blooms” (Pynchon, V. 483). The connection between the two stories demonstrates that Fausto, just as Aubade or Levine, criticizes an intellectual retreat from the world.

The keywords “siege” and “decadence” thus allow us to forge links between separate parts of the novel which ultimately point towards this correlation between the hothouse metaphor and intellectual retreat. Both Foppl’s Siege Party and Fausto’s description of “Siege poetry” (343) show a group of people withdrawing from outside forces—not very different from the New Critical retreat from the onslaught of the masses. Fausto’s view of decadence as a movement
towards death is shared by another character in *V.*, Dudley Eigenvalue, who describes the discussions and artistic activities of the Whole Sick Crew as decadence:

> Conversations at the Spoon had become little more than proper nouns, literary allusions, critical or philosophical terms linked in certain ways. Depending on how you arranged the building blocks at your disposal, you were smart or stupid. Depending on how others reacted they were In or Out. The number of building blocks, however, was finite. … This sort of arranging and rearranging was Decadence, but the exhaustion of all possible permutations and combinations was death. (317)

This estimation echoes not only Callisto’s anxiety about entropy in the world of ideas, his fear that “intellectual motion would … cease” (89), but touches on important contemporary issues as well. Eigenvalue’s observation calls to mind, for example, Hofstadter’s remark in *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (published in the same year as *V.*) that “[y]esterday’s avant-garde experiment is today’s chic and tomorrow’s cliché” (418). It also anticipates certain sentiments of John Barth’s 1967 essay “The Literature of Exhaustion,” in which Barth describes “the used-upness of certain forms or the felt exhaustion of certain possibilities” (64) in literature.

With Eigenvalue, Callisto, Hofstadter, and Barth we have not only clearly arrived in the realm of literary production but have also found the shared view that closed systems lead to stagnation, exhaustion, and, perhaps, death. The consideration of a text as a closed system and the shutting off of outside factors in New Critical close readings, the retreat

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33 The seeming contradiction between the New Criticism’s “present-tenseness” and the apparent connection between retreat and the past in Foppl’s Siege Party and Fausto’s confessions is resolved once we consider the ahistoricity of the New Critics as an expression of the nostalgic retreat into a time before the mass culture, the G.I.Bill, and the like.
into High Culture, or the attempt to keep literature uncontaminated are obviously put into
question here.

The Epilogue reiterates the connection of the hothouse with nostalgia and death: when
Sidney Stencil meets Veronica Manganese (in whom he recognizes Veronica Wren with whom
he had an affair in Florence in 1899), they leave “their thousand separate streets” and “enter …
the hothouse of a Florentine spring once again” (Pynchon, V. 527). Stencil retreats into nostalgia
and brackets the chaos on the eve of Malta’s June Disturbances. Again, as in both Mondaugen’s
story and Fausto’s confessions, the hothouse leads to “an alienation from time” (Pynchon, V.
529). Nowhere is the text as clear: nostalgia is identified as “age’s worst side-effect” making it
“increasingly difficult to live in the real present” (Pynchon, V. 529). Again, at the end stands
death: not long after rekindling his affair with Veronica, a watersprout destroys Stencil’s ship
and kills him. It is, however, one remark in particular, which makes this episode an interesting
meta-comment on what I have discussed thus far. Upon reuniting with Veronica/Victoria in
Malta, Sidney Stencil observes that “in V. were resolved, by some magic, the two extremes [the
street and the hothouse]” (Pynchon, V. 527). This can be read in three ways: the V. here may
refer to (a) the character V., (b) the letter V, or (c) the novel V. How, then, are the two extremes
resolved in each of these three?

The character V. unites in herself the hothouse and the street: she is both linked to the
nostalgic reversion to the past and the violence of the street. The succession from Veronica Wren
to Victoria Manganese to Vera Meroving to the Bad Priest, like the succession from Fausto I to
Fausto III, shows a continuous decline into the inanimate. The various impersonations of V.
iccreasingly incorporate inanimate parts into their bodies—an artificial eye, a sapphire navel,
false teeth—culminating in the Bad Priest who is, it seems, mainly made up of artificial parts. If
V. is a creature of both the hothouse and the street, this shows that the distinction does not matter anymore: both of them are equally subject to entropic decline.

The letter V suggests a similar reading. While it may be read, as Alec McHoul and David Wills do, as a symbol for divergence and deferral (165), it can certainly also be read the other way: as convergence. This is established right at the beginning of the novel. In Norfolk, Profane sees “mercury vapor lamps, receding in an asymmetric V to the east where it’s dark” (2). This V, then, is pointing down the street of the 20th century into an uncertain future. If we consider the hothouse and the street, as Stencil does in his journal, as the two extremes of the dual vision with which the 20th century is approached (506), the V shape looming over the street indicates that both approaches converge at the end. In fact, the experience of almost any character in the novel, no matter whether belonging to the street or the hothouse, ends in decline, stasis, inertia, or death.

The novel V. therefore shows that the hothouse and the street cannot be kept separate. Contamination is always already there. What V. and the two short stories I have discussed show is that what the various characters try to keep at bay (decadence, miscommunication, contamination, decline, death) always eventually enters the hothouse. In fact, it is often the very seclusion of the hothouse that intensifies these phenomena. V. thus challenges the binary opposition of inside and outside. Inertia, death, and decadence can be found both in the hothouse and on the street. At the end of the novel, the distinction between inside and outside does not matter anymore, as the short comment “interior? exterior?” (527) on Sidney Stencil’s final retreat into the hothouse shows. Just as Aubade smashes the window in “Entropy” to put an end to Callisto’s obsession, Stencil finds the dual vision of the hothouse and the street “intolerable” (Pynchon, V. 506). This is, of course, also expressed in the novel’s form, which—to a much
larger extent than the two short stories I have discussed—points outward and forces the reader to
leave the ivory tower. The intertextual and scientific references in “The Small Rain” and
“Entropy” culminate in the proliferation of literary, scientific, pop cultural, or mythical allusions
in V. (and Pynchon’s other novels). In the New Critical attempt to account for all elements of the
text and generate a unifying reading with all tensions resolved, we realize that we have to
consider external factors and are forced to move outside the text. Just as “Entropy” ends with the
dissolution of inside and outside, most binary oppositions (hothouse/street, inside/outside,
fact/ fiction, animate/inanimate) are dissolved in V.

g. Outlook

In terms of reading, “The Small Rain,” “Entropy,” and V. thus all illustrate the
inadequacy of the retreat into the ivory tower. It is important to emphasize that this happens in
both the plot and the form of the texts, as it anticipates a fundamental characteristic of Pynchon’s
entire work. In their plots, all three texts show over and over again that the withdrawal into the
hothouse does not help to keep the foe at bay. Inside and outside cannot be kept separate, and
contamination is always already there. Moreover, it is quite often the very retreat into a closed
system that stifles thought and leads to intellectual decline. Significantly, the stories remain
open-ended: the hothouse has been breached at the end of all three texts but we do not know
what exactly this means for the protagonists. Levine simply falls asleep, Aubade and Callisto
wait for equilibrium, Profane has not “learned a goddam thing” (Pynchon, V. 491), and Stencil
takes off for Stockholm to follow yet another clue (Pynchon, V. 487). This openness is further
emphasized in the formal qualities of the texts. Not only do they interpellate their readers to
leave the ivory tower and put into question the attempt of close reading to focus merely on the
text itself and to generate a unifying reading with all tensions resolved, they also resist
interpretive closure. In following the numerous intertextual, scientific, historical, and pop cultural references, which may or may not be relevant for the interpretation of the stories, we are, at the same time, always confronted with the possibility that all this is just “noise.” As such, the three texts illustrate what Saul is afraid of in “Entropy”: “Ambiguity. Redundance. Irrelevance, even. Leakage. All this is noise. Noise screws up your signal, makes for disorganization in the circuit” (90-91). This not only reiterates the notion that a New Critical attempt in close reading to solve all contradictions in a text is doomed to failure but also anticipates important concerns of the decade ahead.

In challenging the retreat into the ivory tower and in complicating the drawing of dividing lines between inside and outside, sacred and profane, or highbrow and lowbrow, “The Small Rain,” “Entropy,” and V. not only represent a developing new aesthetic in the Sixties and Seventies but also illustrate a change in reading practices. John Cawelti’s 1968 article “Beatles, Batman, and the New Aesthetic” describes another converging V and sounds strikingly like a description of Pynchon’s texts: “suddenly, in the 1960s, just as it seemed the avant-garde and mass culture had agreed to ignore each other, we find ourselves in the midst of a whole series of artistic events which have crossed over and obfuscated the brow lines” (51).

The most obvious example for a new reading paradigm is V.’s Herbert Stencil. To be sure, his obsessive quest for V. is identified by Fausto Maijstral as a hothouse (Pynchon, V. 483) and may thus make him a reader in the ivory tower. While he still shows some traits of close reading (his obsessiveness, the need to resolve all tensions), he has, however, clearly moved beyond the ivory tower. He is at home on the street as well. Since Herbert Stencil is “the century’s child” (48) and since the twentieth century is, as his father notes, characterized by the

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34 The open-endedness of Stencil’s quest for V. has often been read as the reader’s quest for meaning and closure (Hite 50; Kowalewski 192).
dual vision of the hothouse and the street, Herbert Stencil unifies the two extremes. He therefore stands at the end of the years of the reader in the ivory tower as the dominant paradigm and anticipates what is to come during the Sixties and early Seventies: the paranoid reader.
CHAPTER 3

1963-1973: THE PARANOID READER

a. Introduction

Several events in 1963 signaled that an era was over and a new one had begun: the first class of students born after World War II entered college and helped shape a distinctly “youthful” decade, Pynchon’s *V.* was published in April illustrating new tastes and reading practices, Martin Luther King gave his “I have a dream” speech in August proving that the civil rights movement had arrived on the national scene and could no longer be ignored, Richard Hofstadter delivered a speech on “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” at Oxford,¹ and in November John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. Conspiracy theories became a national pastime and the term *paranoia* entered everyday vocabulary.

Political assassinations and scandals, the “politics of spectacle,”² the war in Vietnam, and conspiracy rhetoric all helped shape what Hendrik Hertzberg and David C. K. McClelland call “something of a Golden Age of political paranoia” (53). In all of American literature, Pynchon’s novels of these years are perhaps the most extensive and accomplished treatment of this zeitgeist. I doubt that there are many who would challenge Peter Knight’s estimation of Pynchon as “America’s foremost novelist of paranoia” (57). *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49*, when approached as allegories for reading, illuminate new paradigms at the academy: readers were leaving their ivory towers and adopted new critical methods. Reading in these years, I argue, was shaped by

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¹ It was later published as an article in *Harper’s Magazine* in November 1964.
² The term is used by Christopher Lasch in *The Culture of Narcissism* (79).
what the term paranoia had become in popular usage: a default mode of suspicion, by the young generation’s rebellion against their elders, and by a general loss of trust in official explanations that went hand in hand with a loss of trust in the government. The paranoid reader, as I call the dominant paradigm of these years, is an active and connective decrypter who takes into account every piece of information and attempts to uncover, in the words of Herbert Stencil, the “ominous logic” (Pynchon, V. 484) underneath the surface: a reader who is suspicious, conspirational, and connectivist.

b. Paranoia

It was not only the drug culture and its accounts of acid paranoia that made the term ubiquitous in the Sixties. Perhaps it was simply, as Hertzberg and McClelland put it, “an idée fixe whose time [had] come” (51). Hofstadter’s “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” is important because it not only connects paranoia with a certain kind of political rhetoric that is still around today, but also because it is an early example for the non-medical use of the term during the decade. From the clinical term, Hofstadter borrows the “feeling of persecution” and the systematization of unrelated events into “grandiose theories of conspiracy” (“Paranoid” 4). He is, however, careful to differentiate. “[T]here is,” he writes,

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3 Tom Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, for example, is full of accounts of the sense of universal connectedness, of being “in sync” with the universe, and of instances of paranoia.

4 For the medical use, see for example the *Encyclopedia of Mental Health*: “PARANOIA, although originally referring (in Greek) to almost any kind of mental aberration or bizarre thinking, is currently used to describe a disordered mode of thought that is dominated by an intense, irrational, but persistent mistrust or suspicion of people and a corresponding tendency to interpret the actions of others as deliberately threatening or demeaning” (Fenigstein 83). Later definitions differentiate between bizarre and non-bizarre delusions. According to the American Psychiatric Association’s DSM-IV, paranoia, or delusional disorder, is characterized, among other symptoms, by “Nonbizarre delusions of at least one month’s duration (that is, delusions that involve plausible, real-life situations such as having a disease, being infected, being followed or persecuted, being deceived by a mate, being loved at a distance” (qtd. in Mueser 36). Bizarre delusions which “[involve] mechanisms not believed to exist, such as being controlled by a microchip implanted in the brain or believing others can hear one’s thoughts” (Mueser 36) are therefore not a symptom of paranoia but rather belong to the realm of schizophrenia or other severe mental disorders. It is also noteworthy that paranoid disorders were renamed delusional disorders when the word paranoia was becoming increasingly common in colloquial language, as Mueser points out (36).
a vital difference between the paranoid spokesman in politics and the clinical paranoiac: … the clinical paranoiac sees the hostile and the conspiratorial world in which he feels himself to be living in as directed specifically against him; whereas the spokesman of the paranoid style finds it directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life whose fate affects not himself alone but millions of others. (“Paranoid” 4)

While for Hofstadter this thinking is a phenomenon predominantly of the right wing margins, Hertzberg and McClelland’s essay makes clear that by 1974, the “paranoid style” had long arrived in the mainstream. The political climate of the years between Hofstadter’s and their own article (covering more or less the same time span as this chapter) had turned paranoia, so Hertzberg and McClelland’s claim, from a rare mental affliction into a general “cultural disorder” applicable to “a bewildering variety of experiences” (52).

Pynchon’s novels of these years certainly underpin this assertion. The Crying of Lot 49 offers a parodistic glimpse of the inflationary use of the term: there is, for example, the band The Paranoids (17), Dr. Hilarius’s “relative paranoia” (111), and Oedipa’s suspicion that she might suffer from “true paranoia” (150). In Gravity’s Rainbow, Tyrone Slothrop defines paranoia as a comforting sense of connectedness that stands in contrast to randomness and meaninglessness: “If there is something comforting … about paranoia, there is still also anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long” (441). Paranoia here comes to stand for a way of conspirational thinking, in which unrelated bits of information are connected into a coherent whole, and thus becomes sense-making activity that counters a fear of chaos or unconnectedness. Hertzberg and McClelland reiterate this conception of paranoia: “Paranoia is the very opposite of meaninglessness; indeed, paranoia drenches every
detail of the world in meaning” (60). The paranoiac is a creator of meaning who discovers patterns and gains certainty by making connections. “Paranoia substitutes a rigorous (though false) order for chaos, and at the same time dispels the sense of individual insignificance by making the paranoid the focus of all he sees going on around him—a natural response to the confusion of modern life” (Hertzberg and McClelland 52).

Oedipa Maas and Herbert Stencil are quite representative of this kind of counter-strategy. Whether the hidden order they find is false or not, whether or not they have come across an actual conspiracy is secondary. What both of these figures show is that in the Sixties and Seventies there is an increasing sense that paranoia constitutes not so much a delusion or a distorted account of historical events (as it was for Hofstadter) as rather a healthy default mode of suspicion that may actually be on to something.

c. The Times They Are a-Changin’

Of course the terms paranoia or paranoid were still used in a derogatory sense (as Hofstadter had used it). Especially when criticizing one’s political adversaries, paranoia did not mean that the opponent was “on to something,” but rather that he or she was simply “delusional.” Such was the case with another good example of the rather free use of the term paranoia typical for these years: John Carroll’s Puritan, Paranoid, Remissive, in which he diagnoses the youth movements of the Sixties with paranoia. In his view, “the accumulated diversity, intensity and persistence of the revolt against inherited authority” underscores a peculiar paranoia of the

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5 This brings to mind Marshall McLuhan’s emphasis of the “mosaic form” of newsprint in Understanding Media. This form, lacking a fixed point of view or a single plane of perspective, has been used, so McLuhan, “to present the discontinuous variety and incongruity of ordinary life” (185). Newspapers and magazines thus become an example for the experience of modern culture with its disparities and randomness. This requires an active, participatory reader who organizes and connects unconnected bits of information and is therefore “much involved in the making of meanings” (183).
various movements (80). Of specific concern to Carroll is the permeation of universities with a new paranoid style:

> Paranoia in the universities, given the influence they have today, constituted a far more serious social problem than paranoia anywhere else, for it was the universities that should have been preparing the few who would carry on the painstaking work of reason, that patient building and renovating of those institutions and customs that compose the backbone of civilization. (80)

The students, on the other hand, while sharing the notion of universities as the backbone of civilization, worried that this backbone would be undermined by the infiltration capitalism. Kennedy’s embracing of the idea that university education constituted a means to national growth and the fact that, in Robert Hargreaves’s words, “large numbers of professors … descended from their ivory towers to claim positions of considerable power and prestige in Washington” (532-33) were perceived as threats to the intellectual integrity of universities. Hargreaves sees Kennedy’s assigning a new role to universities as a key to the student unrest of the decade. “American universities,” he writes, were “on their way to becoming an integral part of the capitalist system of production, … a foundation stone of the power structure, inescapably linked to the government, big business, and the defense establishment” (532). The younger generation on the one hand and the “politics of spectacle” on the other hand constitute two other vital factors contributing to important aspects of the paradigmatic reader of the decade.

Let us look at the students first. The trend of increasing enrollment in colleges, which had caused so much anxiety during the Forties and Fifties, continued during the Sixties. Unlike in the preceding decades, however, there was no dominant factor such as the G.I. Bill but rather a

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6 College enrollment rose from 3.5 million students in 1960 to 4.9 million in 1964, 5.9 million in 1966, and almost 8 million by 1970 (Kurian 142).
combination of various phenomena: growing prosperity, new accessibility for minorities, the changing role of women, and quite simply the sheer number of babies born after World War II\(^7\) contributed to record enrollments year after year. Hargreaves argues that the baby boom had produced a “new kind of generation in the educated middle class” (529). He writes,

> They have been shaped, collectively, by entirely new forces, both social and technological. They have no memories of the Depression and World War II, the two great upheavals that molded the attitude of their parents. They are the first ‘permissive’ generation, reared under the benevolent guidance of Dr. Spock. They are the first generation to have grown up with worldwide influences. They are, as a generation, far better educated than their parents and far more affluent than their parents were at the same age. (529)

This generation, *Time* magazine’s “Man of the Year” in 1966, had grown up with the mass media and had its own “cult” books written by authors who had themselves grown up with these influences. Authors like Terry Southern and Joseph Heller, argues Cawelti, created a new aesthetic characterized by “(a) the theme of detached sensuality or the ‘cool,’ (b) the strategy of imposture or the ‘put-on,’ and (c) transformational form or ‘work in process’” (56). In contrast to Macdonald’s negative account of midcult, Cawelti considers this new art as a valuable third way between the “traditional forms and ideas of high culture [and] the formulas of mass culture” (68).

Numerous authors could be added to Cawelti’s account. Vonnegut, Brautigan, Pynchon, and others were consumed by a new kind of audience: young, educated, interested in politics, and increasingly anti-establishment. Reading thus became a part of the youth’s rebellion against the older generation.

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\(^7\) Over 70 million babies were born during the baby boom between 1946 and 1964.
In a decade in which the civil rights movement challenged white superiority, the women’s movement challenged male dominance, the anti-war movement and radical political groups challenged the government’s authority, and the youth rebelled against their parents’ values, morals and traditions, the dominant reading practices in English departments were naturally challenged as well. Pynchon’s challenging the retreat into the ivory tower, as discussed in the previous chapter, was thus a direct expression of discontentment of the young with the old. Not surprisingly, the New Criticism came more and more to be the scapegoat for everything that people felt was wrong with literary criticism and was increasingly criticized for “political complicity or irrelevance” as Gerald Graff puts it in *Professing Literature* (240). The new generation of students and scholars not only brought about a move away from the New Critics and other established schools towards more involved and political modes of reading, but also adopted a kind of conspiracy thinking that was omnipresent during the decade. SDS leader Paul Potter’s 1965 speech “This Incredible War” illustrates the rhetoric that was informed by this type of thinking. In it, Potter portrays a society which is no longer ruled by the democratic wishes of the people, but is instead run by a secretive “system”: “Vietnam, we may say, is a laboratory run by a new breed of gamesmen who approach war as a kind of rational exercise in international power politics” (216). He ends his speech with: “All our lives, our destinies, our very hopes to live, depend on our ability to overcome that system” (219). A “Them vs. Us” dichotomy typical for the paranoid style is clearly visible here. It was, however, not only the New Left that adopted this kind of rhetoric. The Cold War and the war in Vietnam provided politicians with plenty of material to develop their own paranoid style.

In *The Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch describes the careers of both Kennedy and Nixon as examples of “the politics of spectacle” (79), in which politicians “have no other
aim than to sell their leadership to the public” (78). This, argues Lasch, “transformed policy making into publicity, debased political discourse, and turned elections into sporting events” (81). Eric Hobsbawm takes the same line when he notes that the Cuban Missile Crisis was “an entirely unnecessary exercise” of “nuclear gesticulation for purposes of negotiation or … for domestic politics” (229-30). Robert Robins and Jerrold Post identify Nixon as a leader with a “warfare personality” who was “[inducing] societal paranoia for political aggrandizement through group manipulation” (24). With the government fueling the flames like this, it is no wonder that American citizens started to see conspiracy everywhere.

What is interesting about these accounts is that they not only show a continuation of Hofstadter’s “paranoid style” into the Sixties and Seventies, but also mark its arrival in the political mainstream. This is one of the points Knight makes in Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X-Files. Knight not only argues that the 1960s witnessed a shift in conspiratorial thinking away from right-wing notions of conspiracy against the nation towards leftist theories of governmental conspiracies against the individual, he also points out conspirational rhetoric and thinking in the feminist and black protest movements. The paranoid style, which Hofstadter saw as a phenomenon of the right-wing margins, now was adopted not only by the New Left and the counterculture but also by the mainstream.

Kennedy’s assassination on November 22, 1963, set in motion a process of increasing distrust of official explanations. Knight calls the Kennedy assassination therefore “the primal scene … of a postmodern sense of paranoia” (4). If the assassination did not spawn conspiracy

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8 Hobsbawm notes that the apocalyptic tone of Cold War rhetoric was a uniquely American phenomenon (234-37). Demonizing the antagonist in apocalyptic, anti-communist terms, Hobsbawm argues, was useful for winning presidential or congressional elections (237). For the Cold War rhetoric of both Kennedy and Nixon during the 1960 election, see also Bailey and Faber, Columbia Guide, 6-7.
9 Knight is, however, careful to point out that he does so in retrospect. When the Warren Commission’s Report was published in September 1964, polls showed that 87% of Americans believed the commission’s account of the lone
theories and paranoia right away, there were several texts, including David Swanson, Philip Bohnert, and Jackson Smith’s *The Paranoid* or William Crotty’s *Assassinations and the Political Order*, which considered paranoia a motivating force in the actions of political assassins. Ten years after Kennedy’s assassination, however, under the impression of the assassinations of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, of the war in Vietnam, of the Kent State shootings, and of Watergate, conspiracy theories proliferated. Considerable parts of the public started to see connections everywhere, increasingly doubted official explanations, and adopted, Knight maintains, paranoia and suspicion as a kind of “default mode” (31, 33). The years between Kennedy’s assassination and Watergate thus show several distinct shifts: conspirational rhetoric became a mainstream phenomenon used by groups on both the left and the right; conspiracy theories increasingly became a way to explain reality; and more and more people came to suspect that the government knows more than it officially lets on.

Made suspicions and connectivist by the ubiquitous sense of conspiracy, the readers of these years were shaped by all these complex developments. While the increasing distrust in official explanations prompted readers to look for alternative explanations, the rebellion against the older generation was reiterated not only in the challenging of the reading practices of the preceding decade but also in the resurgence of political modes of reading. Under these pressures, readers became dismantlers and decrypters who attempted to tear away superficial layers in order to find patterns underneath. The above mentioned default mode of suspicion neatly corresponds to Paul Ricoeur’s description of the hermeneutics of suspicion in *Freud and Philosophy*, which shall serve as an introduction to the paranoid reader.

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gunman (Knight 81). See also Hofstadter, who notes in “The Paranoid Style” that “conspirational explanations of Kennedy’s assassination have a far wider currency in Europe than they do in the United States” (7).
d. Paranoid Readers

The language of decrypting, decoding, and unmasking is omnipresent in *Freud and Philosophy* since interpretation constitutes for Ricoeur “a work of understanding that aims at deciphering symbols” (9). Ricoeur’s attempt to work out a synthesis between archeological and teleological approaches, between, on one side, a “listening analysis” whose “task is to understand what is signified” (Ricoeur, *Freud* 28-29), and the “school of suspicion” on the other, illustrates the move away from New Critical readings towards the conspirational literary theories of the Sixties and the radically suspicious theories of the Seventies.

Ricoeur’s school of suspicion is represented by “three masters:” Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud (32)—all of whom make a comeback in 1960s critical thinking after a decline in popularity during the preceding decade and a half. Their hermeneutics, writes Ricoeur, aims at the “tearing off of masks” (*Freud* 30) rather than explaining the object, which is to say at demystification, reducing illusions, and reducing disguises. What all of them have in common, according to Ricoeur, is that they “begin with suspicion concerning the illusions of consciousness, and then proceed to employ the stratagem of deciphering” (*Freud* 34). As is the case in conspiracy theories, this kind of reading aims at decoding—at finding the true motivation behind the apparent.

*Freud and Philosophy* starts with a thought that not only illustrates the turn away from New Critical perceptions and language but also anticipates important assumptions of poststructuralism: “Today the unity of text poses a problem” (4). It poses a problem because

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10 In this listening analysis, interpretation, while acknowledging the double meaning of words, aims at the explanation of the textual object and the demonstration of the “fullness of symbol” (Ricoeur, *Freud* 31).

11 In very simple terms (and in a move from textual exegesis to a theory of culture), Marx shows the ideological function of religion as “opium of the masses,” Nietzsche shows how religion elevates weakness to strength, and Freud shows how religion expresses the desire for a father. For a longer discussion of this, see David Stewart: “The Hermeneutics of Suspicion,” 298-303.
symbols mean something other than what they say, and because this, in turn, points towards the inherently equivocal nature of texts. This acknowledgement may lead to at least two different reactions: (a) the attempt to untangle the “conspiracy of the text,” and (b) the effort to emphasize the impossibility of finding clarity and unity. Ricoeur and the paranoid reader belong to the first group. The radical doubt of the second group is expressed in the deconstructive theories of the Seventies. What sets the paranoid reader apart from the doubtful reader of the Seventies is that he or she still believes in the overall achievability of unity and coherence. Ricoeur’s own text shows this: while acknowledging the difficulty of finding unity, he nonetheless attempts to untangle and synthesize. Not an easy task: it requires an awareness of the double-meaning of texts, an awareness of conflicting interpretations, an awareness of various traditions, and the attempt to find a dialectic between the various approaches. Ricoeur and the paranoid reader are therefore located midway between the New Critical attempt to generate a unifying interpretation and the radical doubt of the deconstructionists. Tellingly, Erin White’s characterization of Ricoeur’s hermeneutics sounds exactly like Herbert Stencil’s quest for V. and Oedipa Maas’s quest for the Tristero: Ricoeur’s hermeneutics, White writes, “is always informed by both a suspicion which makes him wary of any easy assimilation to any past meanings and a hope that believes in complete appropriation of meanings while warning ‘not here’, ‘not yet’” (312).

A certain amount of decrypting and pattern spotting is certainly also required to keep track of the proliferation of new theories and approaches at universities during the decade. Despite all differences between text based approaches, such as structuralism or narratology, and historicist approaches, such as Marxism or Feminism, a common denominator is, I argue, the reading stance of the paranoid reader. Structuralism and semiotics, in their search for codes, conventions, and deeper structures which “make possible a text’s readability” (Suleiman 11) and
Marxist theory, in its attempt to uncover hidden power structures operating in society, share a default mode of suspicion, the quest for a deeper and better reading, and the effort to uncover the hidden meanings of a text, while at the same time believing in the achievability of overall unity in interpretation. A quick look at two representative examples for all this, one text based, the other historicist: the early Roland Barthes and Kate Millet, shall suffice.

Barthes’s 1966 article “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives” starts off with an acknowledgement of the dizzying variety of narratives. Not only, writes Barthes, are there countless genres and subgenres in which we come across narratives (he lists for example language, images, and gestures), there are just as many ways to approach them: “Faced with the infinity of narratives, the multiplicity of standpoints—historical, psychological, sociological, ethnological, aesthetic, etc.—from which they can be studied, the analyst finds himself in more or less the same situation as Saussure confronted by the heterogeneity of language” (Barthes, “Introduction” 80). Enough to drive anyone crazy, this variety somehow has to be subdued and structured. Taking linguistics as a starting point, Barthes organizes textual units into a structuralist theory of narrative.

His article illustrates several things: his reading is a laborious process of uncovering, of stripping away layers, and of organizing information into structural units; his reading is connectivist or conspirational in the sense that every part of a text and its context matter and that all of it is organized into patterns; his use of Ian Fleming’s Goldfinger as a prominent example shows a move beyond highbrow notions about subjects worthy of literary study.

Barthes’s reading consists of sorting through textual information, categorizing, and classifying. On a quest for deeper (or hidden) structure, he is looking for the organization and the structures of narrative, for the “grammar” according to which functional “units [are] strung
together,” and for the “logic which regulates the principal narrative functions” (Barthes, “Introduction” 97, 99). Just as there are various levels of functional units, Barthes points out that there are also different levels of meaning. A reader has to work to uncover these different meanings, since “meaning eludes all unilateral investigation” (Barthes, “Introduction” 87). Reading is a connectivist activity that has to account for even the smallest units of a text because, as Barthes argues, “everything in it signifies” (“Introduction” 89). He adds, “art is a system which is pure, no unit ever goes wasted, however long, however loose, however tenuous may be the thread connecting it to one of the levels of the story” (89-90).

Things are further complicated by the narrative situation, which transcends the content and form of the narrative: “Narration can only receive its meaning from the world which makes use of it: beyond the narrational level begins the world, other systems (social, economic, ideological) whose terms are no longer simply narratives but elements of a different substance (historical facts, determinations, behaviours, etc.)” (Barthes, “Introduction” 115). Barthes’s attempt to counter this situation with laborious categorization accounting for even the smallest part is therefore not too far removed from Hertzberg and McClelland’s remark that paranoia imposes a rigorous order on chaos in order to counter the confusion of modern life.

Millet’s 1970 book *Sexual Politics* shows that the paranoid reader is equally to be found in more culturally or historically oriented criticism. As opposed to Barthes’s article, there is even an actual conspiracy that Millet is out to expose: the hidden exertion of power by patriarchy. She prefaces her text with a note that illustrates two important things: “It has been my conviction that the adventure of literary criticism is not restricted to a dutiful round of adulation, but is capable of seizing upon the larger insights which literature affords into the life it describes, or interprets, or even distorts” (xiv). First of all, she clearly moves beyond the New Critical withdrawal from
“life.” Her criticism, she writes, “takes into account the larger cultural context in which literature is conceived” (xiv). Secondly, her remark that literature sometimes distorts certain aspects of life implies that the reader has to “un-distort” the text in order to gain insight. The reader tears off masks and reveals the hidden meaning behind the apparent, which gives her reading a distinctly political function. This becomes even more apparent when she writes: “When a system of power is thoroughly in command, it has scarcely need to speak itself aloud; when its workings are exposed and questioned, it becomes not only subject to discussion, but even to change” (81). The workings that Millet exposes and questions in her text are “power-structured relationships” and “techniques of control” (Millet 31) exerted by patriarchy. Sexual politics thus come to stand for “a set of stratagems designed to maintain a system” (Millet 31). Millet’s reading exposes this system and reveals hidden power structures in texts, relationships or culture. Her reading of Norman Mailer or Henry Miller, for example, unmask patriarchal forms of power or even shows these writers as “counterrevolutionary sexual politicians” (Millet 329).

All this serves to illustrate the cultural forces contributing to the paradigm of the paranoid reader. I use the term paranoid not in the clinical sense of delusional but rather to describe a reader who is characterized by a default mode of suspicion and who attempts to uncover the “conspiracy of the text.” This reader is a puzzle solver, a decrypter, unmasker, organizer, and active sense-maker. Unlike the New Critics, this new reader takes extrinsic information into account: historical context, ideology, and linguistics for example. The paradigm of the paranoid reader thus includes theories as varied as Marxism, Phenomenology, Psychoanalysis, and Structuralism. In contrast to the doubtful reader of the next decade, however, this reader is a unifier and connectivist and therefore still stands in the New Critical tradition of synthesizing all

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12 See for example M.A.R. Habib’s description of structuralism: “Yet structuralism differs from rigid formalism in that it does not isolate the text but situates it within the broader codes, sign systems, and registers of other discourses” (148).
tensions into a coherent whole. Pynchon’s first two novels, *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49*, not only exemplify this kind of reading in their main characters, but also coerce their actual readers into becoming paranoid readers themselves. In doing so, they anticipate and illustrate important reading concerns of the decade ahead.

**e. Stencil, Oedipa, and Us**

There are plenty of decrypters in *V.*: Stencil, Mondaugen, Godolphin, and others are all looking for a message to be decoded, for meaning underneath the surface. Stencil is on a quest for the mysterious woman mentioned in his father’s journal, Mondaugen analyzes “atmospheric radio disturbances” in South-West Africa (Pynchon, *V.* 243), Godolphin is trying to solve the lost country Vheissu’s “riddle” (Pynchon, *V.* 216), Fausto is looking for meaning and humanity in a broken world, and a minor character named Petard is looking for Vivaldi’s lost Kazoo Concerto (Pynchon, *V.* 453). They are all looking for their own “V.” In a conversation with Godolphin, Signor Mantissa, who is plotting to steal Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* from the Uffizi, makes a comment which applies to all of the above characters: “But isn’t it true that we spend our lives seeking for something valuable, some truth to tell a son, to give to him with love?” (Pynchon, *V.* 214). Manitssa’s remark provides us with what I believe to be two central definitions for *V.*—something valuable and *veritas*—and constitutes a valid description for what we are trying to find in interpretation. Stencil’s quest for *V.* is therefore not only representative of all the other quests in the novel but also of the reader’s quest for meaning. Are we not all looking for our own *V.*s in literature: something valuable, some truth, or some insight into life, as Millet put it?

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13 Stencil’s status as an emblematic everyman is emphasized by the fact that he is “the century’s child” (Pynchon, *V.* 48).
Like Stencil, we are confronted with a proliferation of V.s\textsuperscript{14} and are, while we read the novel, engaged in the process of interpretation—of generating meaning and of trying to find “something valuable” in the end. The notion of all readers as “Stencils” is underscored by Fausto, whose “Confessions” generally pose some important meta-questions on reading and writing: “God knows how many Stencils have chased V. about the world” (Pynchon, V. 486).

If one reads The Crying of Lot 49 right after V., one cannot help but notice numerous references to the earlier work: Oedipa listens to Vivaldi’s Kazoo Concerto on the radio (Pynchon, CL 2), suggesting that Petard’s search must have been successful; Yoyodyne, Inc. reappears, and thus somehow seems to be involved with both the mystery of V. and the enigmatic group known as the Tristero; and we come across familiar concepts such as the hothouse, entropy, and prosthetic devices (Pynchon, CL 53, 84, 133). It all feels familiar. Is Pynchon trying to tell us something? Are we to keep track of all the connections? Oedipa finds herself in a similar position: from the moment she becomes executrix of Pierce Inverarity’s estate, she gets a sense of emerging patterns, familiar puzzle pieces, and hidden meaning. We may further ask ourselves if the name Oedipa Maas tells us something. Does it refer to Sophocles’s play? To Freud, perhaps? Or does her last name, as Terry Caesar suggests, simply mean “my ass” (5) and warn us against overinterpretation? Is Pynchon putting us on? Again, Oedipa mirrors our concerns. Early on, she begins to suspect that she is in fact being put on. First by “somebody up there” (Pynchon, CL 17), then by Metzger, her co-executor (20), later by Driblette the theater director (61) and the inventor Nefastis (85), and perhaps even by Pierce Inverarity himself (138).

\textsuperscript{14} There are over forty names, cities, or things starting with V, along with V-shapes and symbols: Queen Victoria (48), Victoria Wren (60), Venezuela (168), Vesuvius (207), Versailles (275), 45\degree angles (41, 249), violence (323), among many others.
Both Stencil and Oedipa are clearly established as readers. Stencil comes across V. when he reads his father’s journal and engages in a “scholarly quest” (Pynchon, V. 57). Oedipa’s pursuit of the Tristero is even more obviously “scholarly,” as is apparent in her attempt to account for all textual variants of Pynchon’s text within the text, *The Courier’s Tragedy*. Both characters follow Ricoeur’s above described pattern of an initial default mode of suspicion followed by “employ[ing] the stratagem of deciphering” (Ricoeur, *Freud* 34). Stencil and Oedipa’s quests therefore show them particularly as paranoid readers. Their frustration at discovering more and more patterns and clues in the process, at encountering difficulties and doubt, and at not seeming to come closer to a final conclusion, mirrors our own frustrations with the texts. While we try to make sense of the novels, we share with Stencil and Oedipa not only the work of decoding but also the fear of inadequately approaching the texts, we may have difficulty in organizing our thoughts, and ultimately try to impose patterns on the text. Just as Stencil is “Stencilizing” his findings, I am “Meinelizing” the novels with my interpretation. Pynchon thus creates paranoid readers on two levels: several characters in *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49* are such readers. At the same time, these texts lure us into becoming paranoid readers ourselves.

f. Stencil and Oedipa as Paranoid Readers

The Them vs. Us mentality typical of Hofstadter’s “paranoid style” is not only evident in Stencil’s suspicion that V. is connected “with one of those grand conspiracies” (Pynchon, V. 161) or the “ultimate Plot which Has No Name” (Pynchon, V. 240), but also in Oedipa’s constant fear of being the victim of some plot. This constant state of suspicion leads both of them to the attempt to unmask a conspiracy or to find patterns behind the obvious. In *The Crying of Lot 49,*
Oedipa’s hunch that there is something to decipher is established from the moment she drives into San Narciso, where she is to meet her co-executor Metzger. Driving down a slope into the city, she becomes aware of “a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate … in her first minute in San Narciso, a revelation also trembled just past the threshold of her understanding” (14). A similar scene in V. connects the letter V with the same ephemeral intent to communicate: Hanne, a bierhalle waitress in Cairo mentioned shortly in the third chapter of the novel, sees a v-shaped stain on a plate: “She tilted the plate another few degrees toward the light and the stain disappeared. Puzzled, she moved her head to look at it from another angle. The stain flickered twice in and out of existence” (89).

Hanne’s effort to reveal the stain not only anticipates Stencil and Oedipa’s quest for a hidden message, but also hints at the ambiguous and indeterminate quality of the text. Determined to make it past any indeterminacy, Oedipa and Stencil set out to find unambiguous meaning in the end. They are, in Ricoeur’s words, engaged in the “work of understanding that aims at deciphering symbols” (Freud 9), namely, interpretation. They are, in a way, the ancestors of Dan Brown’s Robert Langdon: “symbologists” who try to uncover a conspiracy. Stencil is hunting hints, traces, clues, and “veiled references” (Pynchon, V. 59) in order to solve “the V.-jigsaw” (Pynchon, V. 51) and Oedipa is confronted with “a repetition of symbols” (Pynchon, CL 95) behind which she suspects a hidden message.

Oedipa’s quest can be compared to Barthes’s aforementioned essay. Just as Barthes sorts narratives into units and tries uncover the underlying logic, Oedipa is continually engaged in the activity of sorting: giving order to Inverarity’s business interests (Pynchon, CL 72), sorting the events of the night bus ride through San Francisco “into real and dreamed” (Pynchon, CL 95), or piecing together an account of the Tristero (Pynchon, CL 130-31). The importance of sorting in

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15 A flattering comparison for the author of The Da Vinci Code, for sure.
The Crying of Lot 49 is not only underlined by the account of Maxwell’s Demon, who sorts molecules into fast and slow ones (68), but is established in the very first sentence of the novel. By appointing her as executrix of his estate, Inverarity put into her hands “the job of sorting it all out” (Pynchon, CL 1). A remark towards the end of the novel shows that sorting is a sense making activity for Oedipa: “She had dedicated herself … to making sense of what Inverarity had left behind” (Pynchon, CL 147). Sorting, then, is her way of arriving at meaning.

Both Oedipa and Stencil work hard to arrive at meaning and certainly illustrate Barthes’s remark that “meaning eludes unilateral investigation” (“Introduction” 87). Not only is Oedipa’s quest an investigation—several critics have compared her quest to a detective story—16—it is also everything but unilateral: it includes tracking down the symbol of the muted posthorn, attempting to reconstruct the original wording of The Courier’s Tragedy, looking at rare stamps, and interviewing various people. She shows scientific rigour by spending days in libraries, reading various editions, studying footnotes, consulting old journals and pamphlets (Pynchon, CL 130-32), and rereading Inverarity’s testament in order to come to a better understanding (64). Stencil as a reader is equally thorough as Oedipa. On his “grim [and] joyless” quest (Pynchon, V. 53), he is going without sleep (Pynchon, V. 49), looks into police records (Pynchon, V. 445), tracks down people connected to V., travels all over the world, and simply becomes “He Who Looks for V.” (Pynchon, V. 239). Both of them therefore embody what David Stewart writes about the hermeneutics of suspicion: the mindset of suspicion helps a reader to avoid superficial and premature readings and “opens up the text to a new reading, one which is even more powerful than our first reading and which correspondingly can evoke in us an even stronger response” (306).

16 See for example Prasanta Das’s “Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49 and the Classical Detective Story,” Colin Nicholson and Randall Stevenson’s “Words You Never Wanted to Hear,” and Grant, Lot 49, 4-5.
Initially, the efforts of both characters are successful. Their decoding and research reveals something under the surface: Stencil finds that “[e]vents seem to be ordered into an ominous logic” (Pynchon, V. 484) and Oedipa sees “a pattern … beginning to emerge” (Pynchon, CL 71). Shortly thereafter, however, the trouble starts. The proliferation of clues, hints, and symbols leads both Oedipa and Stencil deeper and deeper into ambiguity and uncertainty. Oedipa is unable to track down the original version of *The Courier's Tragedy*. There is always another variant, another edition, or another footnote. Stencil is in a similar situation: instead of coming closer to a solution, he has to admit that V. is becoming “a remarkably scattered concept” (Pynchon, V. 418). Both experience what Driblette had warned Oedipa about: “You can put together clues, develop a thesis, or several … You could waste your life that way and never touch the truth” (Pynchon, CL 62-63).

On top of that fear, Oedipa and Stencil are confronted with the possibility that they are imposing patterns where there is no organization, that they are paranoid. Just as Driblette tells Oedipa not to overinterpret *The Courier’s Tragedy* (“It isn’t literature. It doesn’t mean anything” [Pynchon, CL 60]), there are several characters in *V.* who question Stencil’s quest. Eigenvalue for example, not only notes that Stencil is “Stencilizing” history (Pynchon, V. 241)—subjugating it to his own reading and imposing his pattern on it—but also suspects that Stencil is “grouping the world’s random caries into cabals” (Pynchon, V. 159). Fausto is even more explicit. In his “Confessions,” he claims that life’s single lesson is “that there is more accident to it than a man can ever admit to in a lifetime and stay sane” (Pynchon, V. 343). What makes both Stencil and Oedipa paranoid readers is the fact that despite the lingering doubt they both keep on trying to find meaning and to gain certainty: Stencil goes off to Stockholm following another clue.
(Pynchon, V. 487) and Oedipa famously awaits “the crying of lot 49” hoping for perhaps another hint (Pynchon, CL 152).

g. Reading V. and The Crying of Lot 49

In the first chapter Oedipa recalls a painting she had seen in Mexico City: Remedios Varo’s *Bordando el Manto Terrestre*. She remembers “a number of frail girls with heart-shaped faces, huge eyes, spun-gold hair, prisoners in the top room of a circular tower, embroidering a kind of tapestry which spilled out the slit windows and into a void” (Pynchon, CL 11). What a look at the actual painting reveals is that in the center of the painting there is also a hooded figure in black. Due to the numerous references to the Tristero as hooded black bandits (Pynchon, CL 57, 71, 73, 129, 132), one cannot help but wonder if the figure in the painting is perhaps one of the Tristero—or, in keeping fact and fiction separate, at least an inspiration for Pynchon. Either way, we find ourselves all of a sudden in a situation not unlike Oedipa’s: we start seeing the Tristero everywhere. Similarly, we continually discover V.s: in 45° angles, in the Maltese Cross, in names, words, shapes, and perhaps even in *Gravity’s Rainbow*’s V-2. The novels thus not only illustrate the paranoid reader in their main characters, but also lure us into joining their quest and confront us with the same questions and frustrations as Oedipa and Stencil. Both V. and *The Crying of Lot 49* invite us to go clue hunting: on the plot level, on a linguistic level, and on an intertextual level. Like Oedipa and Stencil, we try to untangle the abundance of allusions and symbols. As scholars, we are like the explorers in Godolphin’s remark about tourists: “They want only the skin of the place, the explorer wants its heart” (Pynchon, V. 215). Our attempts to account for all allusions, to decode the character names, or to apply the notion of entropy to the text show that we have been lured into becoming paranoid readers ourselves.
Oedipa’s experience of “a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning” (Pynchon, CL 14) at the beginning of her quest reflects our initial encounter with the novels: amidst all the words we see patterns, recognize symbols, but do not know yet what it all means. We may notice in V. the enormous number of words starting with the letter v, the animate/inanimate dichotomy, and Pentecostal imagery, or in The Crying of Lot 49 the references to V., the repetition of the word revelation, and gender confusion—but we do not know yet what to do with it. To make sense of all of it, to get to the “heart” of the text, we begin, like Oedipa and Stencil, the work of sorting it all out. Just as they are trying to untangle, to decode the “message,” and to gain certainty, we are engaged in the same activity: interpretation. Oedipa’s bewilderment at Nefastis’s account of entropy (Pynchon, CL 84) may reflect our own. Like Stencil we may take notes about all the various V.s we encounter. Just as Oedipa, we have to sort the episodes into “real and dreamed” (Pynchon, CL 95) and decide whether to read certain elements of the texts “literally or as metaphor” (Pynchon, CL 55). We find allusions, attempt (like another character in V.: Mondaugen) to decrypt the message, and try to come up with an overarching explanation for the symbol V. or the entropy metaphor—only to find ourselves with too many clues and always another lead to follow. The proliferation of signs confronts us with the same questions as Stencil and Oedipa: does it all lead somewhere? Can we really make a finite statement about the message to be decoded in the text? The deeper we get into the novels, we may ask ourselves with Oedipa “whether, at the end of this (if it were supposed to end), [we] too might not be left with only compiled memories of clues, announcements, intimations, but never the central truth itself” (Pynchon, CL 76).

Significantly, none of the mysteries are solved at the end: both Stencil and Oedipa keep on following clues, Godolphin notes that “Vheissu is gone and impossible to bring back,”
Mondaugen’s story ends with him listening to a song he cannot understand, for Malta—where
the Epilogue takes place—“the primary question, that of self-rule, … [remains] unresolved,” and
Profane has not “learned a goddamn thing” (Pynchon, V. 262, 297, 532, 491). The characters are
left up in the air and so are we. We are, perhaps, also confronted with Oedipa’s “symmetrical
four” options at the end: either there is some message to be found, something to be decoded—or
we are imagining it, Stencilizing the text. Or we are the victims of a prank, Pynchon’s dupes—or
we are imaging such a plot.

Mondaugen’s story is paradigmatic for our situation. The letters which Weissmann
claims to have decoded, DIGEWOELDTIMSTEALALENWSWASNEURFULRLIKST
(Pynchon, V. 295), may be complete nonsense—or a code. Do the letters reveal, as Weissmann
tells Mondaugen, the sentence “DIEWELTISTALLESWASDERFALLIST” (295) (“The world
is all that is the case”)? Do the letters that Weissmann removed (GODMEANTNUURK) mean
anything? “God meant New York,” perhaps, as John Stark suggests (42)? If so, what does that
mean and is that another clue we have to follow? What about the sentence that Weissmann
claims to have discovered? Is it just something that Weissmann came up with? Mondaugen
suspects as much: he believes that Weissmann has “been finagling” (Pynchon, V. 295) with the
code. Or should we trace it back to Wittgenstein’s Tractatus? We may play around with
Wittgenstein’s take on facts and truth, as several Pynchon critics have done,17 or we may skip
from the opening line of the Tractatus (“The world is all that is the case”) to its second to last
paragraph, where we come across the remark, “anyone who understands me eventually
recognizes [my propositions] as nonsensical” (Wittgenstein 151). Is this, perhaps, an elaborate
hint that Weissmann’s message is nonsense after all?

17 See for example Schaub, Voice 81-82, Grant, V. 139-40, or Bianchi “The Wittgensteinian Thread in Thomas
Pynchon’s Labyrinth.”
A good example for actual readers’ attempts to “decode” is what is done with the names in the two novels. I have already mentioned various ways to interpret Oedipa’s name, including Caesar’s “my ass” (5). We are never quite sure whether there is a deeper meaning or whether Pynchon is simply having fun. Does Vera Meroving stand for “where-am-I-roving,” as David Richter suggests (qtd. in Grant, V. 120)? Does Vheissu stand for “Wie heisst du?” (Hite 54) or “V.’s you” (Eddins 65)? Does Pynchon’s 1964 letter to the New York Review of Books, in which he points out that he chose the name Genghis Cohen because it sounds like Genghis Kahn (see Hurley 38), suggest that there may not always be more behind the names than a pun and thus warn us against reading (paranoically) too much into the names? What begins on the level of names continues on every other level of the novels so that the reader joins Stencil and Oedipa on a similarly exhausting and similarly never-ending quest.

The parallels between Stencil and Oedipa’s quests should of course warn us that our own attempt to read the novels means that we are Stencilizing the texts as well. If Stencil’s quest is representative of the paranoid reader and if the text turns its readers into paranoid readers, as I have argued, one obvious question is whether most of what we read into V. is also nothing but “impersonation and dream” (Pynchon, V. 59). A remark in Chapter Eight of V., which may be attributed to either Stencil or the narrator, further reminds us that each interpretive attempt is personal and that there are plenty of competing readings: “People read what news they wanted to and each accordingly built his own rathouse of history’s rags and straws. In the city of New York alone there were at a rough estimate five million different rathouses” (239). In addition to that, Fausto’s “Confessions” suggest that not even a single person offers a single continuous identity but rather “a successive rejection of personalities” (Pynchon, V. 326). He therefore comes to the nihilistic conclusion that “[t]he world is, in sad fact, meaningless, based as it is on the false

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18 See also Hurley 95-96 and Grant, Lot 49 3-6.
assumption that identity is single, soul continuous” (Pynchon, V. 327). Should that perhaps warn us against trying to find certainty in the novel or to come up with a unifying interpretation?

The texts thus increasingly pose questions which we can relate to our own reading of them. Almost without us noticing, then, the novels have pushed us in the direction of clinical paranoia: the state, in which, as Hofstadter notes, the patient perceives “the conspiratorial world … directed specifically against him” (“Paranoid” 4). When Stencil wonders about the hunt for V. as a “scholarly quest” (Pynchon, V. 57), is he really talking about us? Does the remark about the result of Stencil’s research as a “grand Gothic pile of inferences” (Pynchon, V. 239) perhaps refer to our attempt to interpret the novel? We come to suspect that the warnings of Driblette, Eigenvalue, or Fausto are also meant for us. Much like Oedipa or Stencil, we start to see things everywhere: V. is everywhere, the hothouse metaphor is everywhere, and the text continually speaks to us. Do we have to decode the names? What about the gender confusion? What about entropy? Are they keys to read the novel? What about Vheissu and the Tristero? Are we perhaps to read the Tristero as “a historical principle, a Zeitgeist” (Pynchon, CL 136) and Vheissu as “a symptom” (Pynchon, V. 511)? Do they stand for the zeitgeist of the Fifties and Sixites, the age of McCarthy and the “Paranoid Style”? We hunt for clues, decipher symbols, try to find meaning just like Mondaugen, Stencil, and Oedipa, and we are, just like the characters, left with no explanation or solution. Are we supposed to keep on trying, like Oedipa and Stencil? What if we are merely the dupes of Pynchon? Perhaps the Gaucho in V. is right when he suspects that “it is all a mockery” (Pynchon, V. 222). The more we try to come to a solution, the more another of Fausto’s remarks may apply to us: “Only saints and lunatics can remain ‘devoted’ for extended periods of time” (Pynchon, V. 371)?

19 Considering the experience of many readers who give up reading Pynchon’s novels not even halfway into them, Fausto’s observation is certainly also applicable to those who make it all the way through.
transcendent revelation at the end? Or the lunatic who just sees things? Perhaps a little bit of both.

Both in their main characters and by forcing a certain kind of reading onto their readers, V. and The Crying of Lot 49 thus illustrate the limitations of the paranoid reader. Our attempts to decode, just like Oedipa’s and Stencil’s, do not seem to generate a definite message or a unified response. Where these attempts may lead instead is summed up in a phrase from Pirate Prentice’s vision at the beginning of Gravity’s Rainbow: “this is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive knotting into” (3-4). As paranoid readers, we are thus confronted with what Oedipa calls “the void” (Pynchon, CL 141). The notion of the void expresses two central concepts: meaninglessness and infinite deferral of meaning. This not only poses important questions about interpretation but also illustrates fundamental concerns of the decade ahead.

h. The Void: Looking Ahead

Just as Eigenvalue supposes, as mentioned before, that Stencil is organizing “the world’s random caries into cabals” (Pynchon, V. 159) we have to ask ourselves if we are not imposing our pattern on the polyphony of the text, to which we cannot adequately do justice. By turning their readers into Stencils, both V. and The Crying of Lot 49 put into question not only the attempt in interpretation to produce a universally valid, comprehensive, and unifying explanation but also the ability of a text to convey transcendent truths. Toward the end of The Crying of Lot 49, Oedipa poignantly expresses the possibility that her effort to decipher may reveal no pattern or hidden meaning at all: “Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only earth” (150). The option that there is not “[a]nother mode of meaning behind

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20 I am therefore aware, I should add here, that my Meinelizing of the novels is far from being a comprehensive account of them.
the obvious” (Pynchon, *CL* 150) would expose both her and Stencil’s quest as delusional. While Stencil concedes that in the end it all may “add up only to the recurrence of an initial and a few dead objects” (Pynchon, *V.* 480), he is not as self-aware as Oedipa, who openly admits that she may be imagining things: towards the end, she sees, as mentioned before, four alternatives: either there is the Tristero, or she is hallucinating it; either it is all an elaborate plot against her, or she is hallucinating such a plot (Pynchon, *CL* 140-41). She knows that she is dangerously close to paranoia and that she may never be sure. She is, however, also terrified at being confronted with these “symmetrical four”: “this, oh God, was the void” (Pynchon, *CL* 141).

The void thus stands not only for the notion that there may never be clarity or an unambiguous message at the end but also for what both Oedipa and Stencil are afraid they might discover: that there may be no plot or message after all, only randomness, meaninglessness, and nothingness. The aforementioned Remedios Varo painting establishes Oedipa’s fear of the void early on. The thought that the girls’ attempt “to fill the void” (Pynchon, *CL* 11) is hopeless scares her and fills her with great sadness. The subplot of the mysterious land Vheissu in *V.* similarly confronts us with the void. We are left unsure about whether or not it really exists, whether it is a prank or a metaphor.\(^2^1\) Godolphin, however, hints at something that corresponds to Oedipa’s “earth” under the hieroglyphic streets. During his Southern Expedition he discovers the void: “It was Nothing I saw” (Pynchon, *V.* 215).

Both Stencil and Oedipa would rather keep their quest going on endlessly than having to confront the void—thus Oedipa’s reluctance “about following up anything” (Pynchon, *CL* 137) and Stencil’s method to “approach and avoid” (Pynchon, *V.* 51). Stencil’s hunt for V. as quest for *veritas* and Oedipa’s attempt to unmask the Tristero shows that reading for them aims at

\(^{21}\) Godolphin tells Vera: “No time for pranks. No more Vheissus” (263). Stencil’s colleague Demivolt later calls Vheissu “a symptom” (512).
certainty. If there really is, as Fausto notes, more randomness to life “than a man can ever admit … and stay sane” (Pynchon, V. 343), then Stencil and Oedipa’s quest is their attempt to stay sane. As readers, they are like the girls in the painting: trying to fill the void with meaning. As paranoid readers they thus reiterate what Hertzberg and McClelland write about paranoia: they “[drench] every detail of the world in meaning” (60).

The void anticipates the two most important reading paradigms of the next decade: reader-response theory and deconstruction. Reader-response criticism acknowledges the void in that it presupposes that there is no inherent meaning in the text itself. Only in the interaction between reader and text is meaning generated. This idea is explicitly expressed in Sidney Stencil’s observation “that no Situation had any objective reality: it only existed in the minds of those who happened to be in on it at any specific moment” (Pynchon, V. 199), in Oedipa’s question “Shall I project a world?” (Pynchon, CL 64), and in Driblette’s description of himself as “the projector at the planetarium” (Pynchon, CL 62): “That’s what I’m for. To give the spirit flesh. The words, who cares? … But the reality is in this head. Mine” (Pynchon, CL 62). The concession that there is no meaning in the text itself not only exposes the paranoid reader as paranoid in the clinical sense after all, but also signals a shift of critical attention to a new set of issues. For the reader-response critics the void is not something that causes anxiety, but is rather the pretext upon which they move their focus away from the text towards the reader. Whether a reader’s perception of a text is guided by interpretive communities, as Stanley Fish believes, or by an Erwartungshorizont, as Hans Robert Jauss argues, reader-response critics do not doubt a reader’s ability to generate “meaning.”

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22 See also Ricoeur’s “The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation”: “what is to be interpreted in a text is a proposed world, a world that I might inhabit and wherein I might project my ownmost possibilities” (140).
This ability is questioned by those theories which embrace and explicitly thematize the void: poststructuralism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and deconstruction. The randomness and meaninglessness stressed by Eigenvalue and Fausto points towards these theories emphasizing fragmentation, ambiguity, and infinite deferral. Oedipa’s, Stencil’s and perhaps our own frustration with the novels are exacerbated in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. While *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49* certainly anticipate critical concerns of the Seventies, they nonetheless differ from *Gravity’s Rainbow* in that their protagonists are still paranoid readers. Tyrone Slothrop, the main character of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, illustrates a clear move beyond this reading paradigm. There are, to be sure, numerous conspiracies and plenty of paranoia in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, but rather than pointing towards the paranoid reader, they illustrate what Knight argues in *Conspiracy Culture*. In the Seventies, he writes, conspirational thinking reaches a point of exhaustion (33). The sense that “[t]here is always one more clue to chase, one more theory to pursue, one more connection to make” (Knight ix) leads not only to a feeling of vertigo but also to a growing suspicion that final certainty can never be reached. Seen from this perspective it is only a logical next step that some of the dominant theories of the next decade share a doubt of the ability to “make sense.”
CHAPTER 4
1973-1980: READING BETWEEN DOUBT AND HOPE

a. Introduction

The 1970s have been called many things: the Me Decade (Wolfe), the Age of Diminishing Expectations (Lasch), “our strangest decade” (Bailey and Farber, Seventies 1), the Age of Uncertainties (Farber 26), or “a nondescript interlude” (Hoehler xiii). However one looks at the decade, there is a distinct sense of uncertainty, failure, and disillusionment. If the Sixties were a time of hope and optimism, albeit troubled, the political and economic developments of the Seventies brought a sense of crisis to the national consciousness. It is therefore fitting that the relatively optimistic paranoid reader as the dominant paradigm is ousted by a much more skeptical reader who is strangely fascinated by “the void.” The years 1966 and 1968 allowed early glimpses of critical trends that came to dominate the Seventies. The 1966 conference on “The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man” at Johns Hopkins University, which included talks by Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and Roland Barthes, marked the advent of poststructuralist and deconstructionist ideas and changed the way texts were read in the U.S.\(^1\) The conference not only was the starting point of a constant influx of

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\(^1\) Not everybody, however, was as open as J. Hillis Miller and Paul de Man, who were teaching at Johns Hopkins at the time the conference took place. Arthur Marwick, for example, called deconstruction, postmodernism and other critical currents of the time the “hot pants of academia” (316).
French theory during the next decade\(^2\) but also indicated a radicalization in literary theory that mirrored the concurrent radicalization of student movements in the late Sixties. Roland Barthes’s seminal essay “The Death of the Author,” published in 1968,\(^3\) anticipated two issues that will be at the core of this chapter: on the one hand, the notion that there is no ultimate, determinable meaning in texts, and, on the other hand, a new interest in the reader. His text illustrates the move away from the paranoid reader as a decrypter and unifier towards what I call the doubtful\(^4\) reader. “Once the Author is removed,” Barthes writes, “the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. … writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning” (147). In *Theories of Reading*, Karin Littau divides “post-Barthesian” theories of reading into two contrasting camps: those that argue for the impossibility of reading and those adopting the readability of texts as their premise (105-108).\(^5\) I am following this dichotomy when talking about reading between doubt and hope.

What became of the paranoid reader and his effort to uncover one ultimate meaning or message is illustrated in *Gravity’s Rainbow* by Pirate Prentice. In order to make visible a “Kryptosam”-encoded message, he has to put the invisible ink in contact with seminal fluid (73).

The connection of decoding and onanism shows what the effort of the paranoid reader came to

\(^2\) The enormous influence of French poststructuralist and deconstructionist thinkers has an interesting parallel in the economy: in 1971, the number of imported goods exceeded the number of exported goods for the first time in the twentieth century (Bailey and Farber, *Seventies* 3).

\(^3\) 1968 of course is also the “Annus Horribilis” (Marwick 642) that saw worldwide episodes of violent clashes between students and police forces. The United States were no exception with confrontations at Columbia University, Berkeley, and at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. The assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King (and the inner-city riots that followed) only added to the violent climate. For a detailed account, see Marwick, chapter 12 (584-675), or Mark Kurlansky’s *1968: The Year That Rocked The World*.

\(^4\) In calling the paradigmatic reader of these years the “doubtful” reader, I am adopting Geoffrey Hartman’s description of “negative hermeneutics,” in which he describes the new mode of approaching a text as “one of doubting” (“Discontents” 211).

\(^5\) Susan R. Suleiman subsumes almost all the critics mentioned in the following under the header of “audience-oriented criticism.” Her article “Introduction: Varieties of Audience-Oriented Criticism,” in which she distinguishes between rhetorical, semiotic/structuralist, phenomenological, subjective/psychoanalytical, sociological/historical, and hermeneutic approaches, is an excellent introduction to reader-oriented theories. Robert C. Holub’s *Reception Theory* and Littau’s *Theories of Reading* are also very useful.
be considered in the Seventies: intellectual masturbation.  

Published in 1973, when the first oil crisis triggered what Hobsbawm called the “Crisis Decades,” Pynchon’s third novel reflects the zeitgeist of hope and doubt and the developments of critical reading better than any other text of these years. Although the word paranoia possibly appears in it more often than in all other Pynchon novels taken together, Gravity’s Rainbow shows a clear move beyond the paranoid reader. As in Pynchon’s first two novels, Gravity’s Rainbow’s main character, Tyrone Slothrop, is not only a representative example of concurrent reading anxieties but also a mirror image of our own frustrations with the text. “The Zone” through which Slothrop moves reflects not simply our moving through Gravity’s Rainbow but also constitutes, I argue, a metaphor for reading in poststructuralist times. By both acknowledging the void of infinite deferral and celebrating the reader’s freedom, Gravity’s Rainbow negotiates a way through the Zone: reading between doubt and hope.

b. Snapshot 1973

On January 20, 1973, Richard Nixon was inaugurated for a second term after he had won the 1972 election with 60.7% of the popular vote. The landslide victory suggested that there had been some truth to Nixon’s statements about the “silent majority.” Although Nixon’s second term started with the Paris Peace Accords and the end of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, dark

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6 The working title for Gravity’s Rainbow, Mindless Pleasures, seems to point in a similar direction. See also a later comment in the novel about “the scholar-Magicians of the Zone,” who find “a Text, to be picked to pieces, annotated, explicated, and masturbated till it’s all squeezed limp of its last drop” (529).

7 Bailey and Farber point out that even in early 1968 “[m]ost Americans … disapproved of the antiwar protesters” and only 28% were in favor of troop withdrawal from Vietnam (Columbia Guide 41). Even after the Tet Offensive in late January 1968, generally considered a turning point in public opinion, Americans were, according to Bailey and Farber, “equally divided between those who believed the war could and should still be fought to victory and those who believed some kind of American withdrawal was the only solution” (Columbia Guide 42). Furthermore, the majority still “disapproved of the anti-war movement in all its forms” (42). Even after the Kent State shootings, three quarters of Americans, as Bailey and Farber point out, felt “that it was wrong to protest against the government” (Columbia Guide 51).
clouds were gathering on the horizon. Pynchon’s Gravity's Rainbow and Pink Floyd’s The Dark Side of the Moon, released in February and March respectively, were perfect accompanying material for the events of the following months.

An overall sense of disillusionment had been growing since the end of the Sixties. The New Left, the Women’s Rights movement, the Gay Rights movement, and the Civil Rights movement all had gone through a similar evolution of radicalization and disappointment. The war in Vietnam had been continued despite massive protest, the economic boom had begun to subside, the Hippie movement had not only witnessed Woodstock but also Altamont, and the Civil Rights Movement had split into various factions, none of which were able to rekindle the spirit of the Martin Luther King era. With Watergate, this disillusionment gained a new intensity. The five men that had been arrested at the Watergate complex in June 1972 were tried and convicted in January 1973, and the Senate formed the Watergate Committee whose hearings started in May. In the months that followed, heads began to roll, and it became increasingly clear that President Nixon was personally involved in the scandal. The next blow to the national confidence came in October 1973 when the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) proclaimed an oil embargo, thus triggering the 1973 oil crisis. In Age of Extremes, Hobsbawn considers 1973 the beginning of the “Crisis Decades.” After 1973, Hobsbawn argues, the world not only entered a “Second Cold War” (244) but also “lost its bearings and slid into instability and crisis” (403). The war in Vietnam, and to a certain extent the Yom Kippur War of 1973, not only meant public failure and defeat but also showed that the USA was relatively isolated. The oil crises of 1973 and 1979 were, in Hobsbawn’s words, “awful moments …

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8 In addition, revolutions around the globe in the years that followed (for example in Ethiopia 1974, Zimbabwe 1976, Nicaragua 1976, and Iran 1979) contributed to the United States’ sense of insecurity as it “actually looked as though it might shift the superpower balance away from the USA, since a number of regimes in Africa, Asia and even on the very soil of the Americas were attracted to the Soviet side” as Hobsbawn put it (245).
when the greatest power on the earth could find no response to a consortium of feeble Third World states” (248).

These political and economic developments were joined by societal shifts which were heralded by Daniel Bell in his 1973 book *The Coming of Post-industrial Society*. Whether or not one subscribes to Bell’s views on the shift from an industrial society based on manufacturing to a service-based postindustrial society, his text is nonetheless important for at least two reasons: it was indicative of the rise of neo-conservatism and it illustrated a tendency in conservative critics to blame the national crisis on the “liberal knowledge elite.”\(^9\) This elite was primarily believed to sit in universities. If the New Left, as J. David Hoeveler argues in *The Postmodernist Turn*, focused on culture as a new “playing field of any viable leftist program” because of its disillusionment and defeat at the level of politics, and if the university, in turn, “emerged as the citadel of leftist opinion” (36), it hardly comes as a surprise that the academy often became the target of neo-conservative scorn.

A look at the academy in 1973 shows that the “poststructuralist turn” had left its mark: French theory was *en vogue*, there was plenty of transatlantic exchange, and Derrida was well on his way to becoming an intellectual celebrity.\(^10\) Paul de Man and J. Hillis Miller were both teaching at Yale, Roland Barthes published *The Pleasure of the Text*, Hayden White published

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\(^9\) This tendency can also be observed in Kevin Phillips’s *Mediocrity*, in which he argues that the liberal intelligentsia, “a meritocratic elite, with minimal roots in security or tradition, little sense of family and place, and small ability to serve the societal anchor function of past Western elites,” is alienating the masses (38). J. David Hoeveler’s description of the changes in thought and culture during the 1970s in his 1996 book *The Postmodernist Turn* draws from both Bell’s and Phillips’s text. Hoeveler uses what he calls the “postindustrial experience” as a paradigm for concurrent intellectual developments. The main intellectual developments of the “postindustrial experience,” according to Hoeveler, are the disintegration of the New Left after the end of the Sixties and its reconstitution in the academy, where a re-discovered Marxism clashed with structuralist and poststructuralist influences from abroad. At the same time, Hoeveler argues, the creation of new elites in the postindustrial society caused the rise of a New Right and neconservatism. Hoeveler’s chapters on “Wars of Words,” “Reading Left,” and “Neoliberalism” are especially useful here.

Metahistory, and Wolfgang Iser’s The Implied Reader, published in Germany in 1972, was in the process of being translated into English. The trend of transatlantic exchange continued throughout the decade: Derrida was visiting professor at several American universities (including Johns Hopkins, Yale, and SUNY at Buffalo), and Iser and Lyotard both taught at the University of California at Irvine. The proliferation of theories during the decade makes it hard to pinpoint one dominant theory. Courtesy of what Graff describes as the “field coverage model” a whole array of theories co-existed alongside each other. Apart from poststructuralism and reader-response theory, there was also feminist criticism, a resurgent Marxism, and what Lacan termed the “return to Freud.”

Graff notes that the new methods and theories were routinized relatively quickly. The absorption into universities somewhat took away the edge of many of the theories and the new approaches emerged, as Graff puts it, “as yet another set of self-protected methodologies, fully insured against error, backed by its own Fieldspeak, its own journals …, and immune to criticism from outsiders” (Professing 241). For him, it is therefore just another example of a recurring pattern: new theories are absorbed into departments alongside the old methods co-existing without the need to confront each other. “The New Critical fetish of unity,” Graff writes, “is

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11 In Professing Literature, Graff points out recurring patterns in the development of literature departments. He focuses not only on the institutionalization and routinization of critical practices (such as the New Criticism) but also on another recurring phenomenon: the co-existence of widely divergent theories within the same department whereby major conflicts between various groups are never adequately addressed or resolved. The “field coverage model,” a hiring policy in which a literature department “would consider itself respectably staffed once it had amassed instructors competent to ‘cover’ a more or less balanced spread of literary periods and genres, with a scattering of themes and special topics” (7). This model, notes Graff, has had the advantage of making the creation of curricula more or less self-regulated and to make departments quite flexible in assimilating new ideas and methods while avoiding “incurring paralyzing clashes of ideology” (7). On the other hand, this model “left the faculty without the need to confer about matters of fundamental concern with colleagues in their own and other departments” (8). The result is isolation, disconnection, lack of controversy, and lack of critical exchange. “Students (and instructors),” writes Graff, “were thus deprived of a means of situating themselves in relation to the cultural issues of their time” (9).

12 Important texts that were published around this time include Millet’s Sexual Politics (1969), Germaine Greer’s The Female Eunuch (1970), Fredric Jameson’s Marxism and Form (1971), or Lacan’s Écrits (1966; translated into English in 1977).
replaced by a fetish of disunity, aporias, and texts that ‘differ from themselves’” (Professing 242). Despite the routinization of the new theories, they brought with them important influences of the late Sixties: disappointment, disillusionment, radicalization, and doubt. With these influences, the paradigm of the paranoid reader is replaced by a more radical reader: the doubtful reader.

c. Doubt: Loss of Trust and the Doubtful Reader

The climate of doubt and disillusionment certainly contributed to the quick acceptance of the new theories. The paranoid reader was exhausted and his or her attempt to extract a stable objective meaning from the text was not only challenged in the theoretical realm by the work of Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Barthes, and Derrida but also in “real life” where the theories about Kennedy’s assassination reached dizzying proportions. The new reader emerging in the wake of the poststructuralist turn is still paranoid in the sense of a suspicion that “everything is connected,” but this reader has ceased to believe in the ability to come up with a totalizing interpretation.

The political assassinations of the Sixties, the war in Vietnam, and the Kent State shootings had all done their part to alienate large parts of the public from their leaders. The Watergate scandal and Nixon’s resignation in August 1974, however, marked a sad climax in the public’s loss of faith in their government. The years 1973 and 1974 thus rang in what Beth Bailey and David Farber call an “era of distrust and cynicism” (Columbia Guide 67).

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13 Bailey and Farber cite an opinion poll of late 1973 in which 57% of all Americans claimed to distrust their government. In 1958, the percentage had only been 24% (Columbia Guide 67).

14 A useful account of the zeitgeist of distrust and cynicism is Farber’s “The Torch Had Fallen.” The media of the Seventies, argues Farber, helped to fuel the distrust in the government. By focusing on weaknesses and awkward moments of the presidents, the media created a “journalistic zeitgeist in which no presidential weirdness was too unimportant to print” (Farber 19). Ford was portrayed as somewhat of a klutz and his pardon of Nixon was suspected to have been a deal with his predecessor. Approval ratings went down from 71% to 49% after the pardon
The oil crises of 1973 and 1979 are the bookends of an era of loss of trust in the government, economic crises, “stagflation,” a growing unemployment rate, and international conflicts. President Carter’s attempt to shake up the nation with his “crisis of confidence” speech in July 1979 showed that the zeitgeist of crisis was still very much on the national mind at the end of the decade.\textsuperscript{15} The feeling of uncertainty, limitation, and failure is clearly expressed in the boom in apocalyptic fiction and movies. Disaster movies such as \textit{Airport} (1970), \textit{The Poseidon Adventure} (1972), \textit{The Towering Inferno}, and \textit{Earthquake} (both 1974) were tremendous box-office successes of the decade.\textsuperscript{16} It is also quite telling that Hal Lindsey’s book \textit{The Late Great Planet Earth} was one of the decade’s bestselling books. Lindsey’s apocalyptic vision, in which he compared contemporaneous events with biblical prophecies, depicted the European Economic Community as ruled by the Antichrist and located the rapture somewhere in the 1980s. “In a time of great uncertainty,” write Bailey and Farber, “this work promised certainty: the end of the world” (\textit{Seventies} I). Another doomsday scenario can be found in the introduction to Lasch’s \textit{The Culture of Narcissism}, adding to the list of national ills the “impending exhaustion of natural resources” (xiii).

\textsuperscript{15} In his speech, Carter traced all current problems to a root much deeper than “gasoline lines or energy shortages” (388): a “crisis of confidence” expressing itself in “growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives[,] in the loss of a unity of purpose for [the] nation,” in the “erosion of confidence in the future,” and in the loss of faith in progress (389-90). In order to overcome this crisis, Carter called for a “path of common purpose and the restoration of American values” (392).

\textsuperscript{16} Stephen Keane’s \textit{Disaster Movies} provides a good overview of the topic. Keane notes that 53 disaster movies were released during the 1970s (19). Another good treatment of the topic is William Graebner’s article “America’s Poseidon Adventure,” in which argues that these movies are an expression of a “crisis of the spirit” in 1970s America. This crisis, he writes, is a product of forces of long gestation: a religious declension, captured by the slogan ‘God is dead’; a revolution in genetics that threatened the autonomy of the self and the efficacy of the social environment; the continued popularity of behaviorist psychology, with all that implied for what Skinner called ‘freedom of dignity’; memories of the Holocaust, seeping into consciousness; the postmodern turn, calling into question the possibility of knowing the truth; and boredom, that complex amalgam of the affluent, leisured society and existential doubt. (175)

At the same time, Graebner argues, such movies show a search for heroes, for people that “find a way out.”
In this climate of doubt, doomsday scenarios, and disaster movies, it is fitting that not only was “skepticism towards government … firmly cemented into place,” as Knight argues (33), but also that conspiracy theories surrounding the Kennedy assassination reached a point of bewildering variety and scope. The proliferation of conspiracy theories about Kennedy’s death eventually led, as Knight puts it, to “an infinite abyss of suspicion” (99). Instead of bringing closure, the various theories “open[ed] up a space of doubt and suspicion without ever fully closing it down” (98). The number of pages collected by the Assassination Records Review Board (ARRB) neatly illustrates the seeming endlessness of information: between 1992 and 1997, the ARRB collected around 4.5 million pages (Knight 93). For Knight, the Kennedy assassination thus becomes “the primal scene of postmodernism” (116). The sheer amount of information and its resistance to closure is paralleled in the thought of the period—one need only think of Geoffrey Hartman’s notion of the “chaos of texts” with which the critic is confronted (“Discontents” 211). For Knight, there is therefore a clear correspondence between the state of conspiracy theories and contemporaneous critical thought. “In effect,” argues Knight, “[Kennedy’s assassination] inspires an endless proliferation of narratives about the impossibility of coherent narratives” (115). Hoeveler similarly draws an analogy between concurrent anxieties and developments in literary theory. He sees the postindustrial experience as one that is characterized by “a feeling of unreality about all things, of a loss of substance, immediacy, tangibility, and wholeness” (13). Elsewhere in The Postmodernist Turn he writes, “The recurring motif in 1970s culture is the dismantling of inherited forms, descriptive norms, sharp and inclusive modes of categorization” (xiv). Quoting extensively from Alan Toffler’s Future Shock,

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17 Graff therefore writes (even though he modifies this statement afterwards): “All the members of the Yale group write self-consciously as critics in an age of critical (and cultural) overproduction—an age in which so many ‘readings’ have collected around even the slighter authors and works that we have begun to lose confidence in our ability to read” (“Fear” 476).
Hoeveler argues that in the Seventies “[t]he sense of solidness, permanence, and wholeness yields to fissures, disintegration, intangibility” (6). If all this sounds distinctly postmodern, it is because Hoeveler tries hard to establish a connection between the postindustrial experience and the postmodern turn. The postindustrial consciousness, Hoeveler argues, underscores the whole cultural effect of postmodernism. Symbol becomes more significant than fact, appearance more than reality; image becomes essence, theory transcends analysis. In academic discourse, one hears much talk about the death of the subject, the decentered self, the dissolution of meaning, the pluralistic and invisible character of power, and the absent cause. (13-14)

For Hoeveler, radical poststructuralism, reflecting “a mood of skepticism and iconoclasm” (20), thus becomes a paradigmatic theory of the Seventies. Despite all differences between the various deconstructionist camps, Hoeveler sees them as indicators of a general cultural change or zeitgeist: “New uncertainties about meaning, authorial intention, reference, and subject, as Yale scholarship displayed, seemed to indicate that a morning of radical skepticism about literature had dawned, that the French had left their unsettling mark” (33). Ground zero for this “unsettling mark” is perhaps nowhere as polemically heralded as in Barthes’s 1968 essay “The Death of the Author.” Since Barthes’s text echoes or anticipates concerns of Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida,

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18 Hoeveler uses J. Hillis Miller’s career as a representative example for the shift from New Criticism to phenomenology to poststructuralism. The conflict between formalism and contextual criticism is reiterated in the Yale School’s accusation of Miller “of formalism, of removing literature from its social and political connections” (Hoeveler 29). In an interview with Robert Moynihan, Miller shows a position that is a blend of New Criticism and poststructuralism: “The teaching of literature must be based on a love for language, a care for language and for what language can do. The study of literature must begin with language and remain focused there” (qtd. in Hoeveler 29). Ironically, the Yale critics themselves were charged with being apolitical, with privileging art “while avoiding all the unpleasant problems of American life in the era of the Vietnam War” (Hoeveler 29). Hoeveler mainly refers to Donald Pease’s “The Other Victorians at Yale,” published in Jonathan Arac’s The Yale Critics. Similarly, in his After the New Criticism, Frank Lentricchia accuses the Yale School of continuing the formalist tradition. See also Leitch’s Theory Matters, 11-12.
and J. Hillis Miller, it shall serve as a point of departure for establishing an overview of the doubtful reader.

A clear move beyond the paranoid reader’s attempt to decrypt the text in order to reveal a fixed message at its core is Barthes’s insistence on the multi-dimensionality of texts: “We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture” (“Death” 146). Barthes essentially reiterates Kristeva’s notion of intertextuality as expressed in her 1966 article “Word, Dialogue and Novel”: “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (37). This “multiplicity of writing,” then, keeps readers from being able to decipher a text, to squeeze the last bit of meaning out of it (Barthes, “Death” 147). All a reader can do is to participate in the endless production of meaning—without ever reaching certainty or closure.

Barthes therefore considers any given book “only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred” (“Death” 147). Here, Barthes echoes issues put forth by Derrida, whose famous challenge of centered structures in his 1966 essay “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” shows him as a paradigmatic doubtful reader. His argument that after Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger’s work “it was … necessary to begin thinking that there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of non-locus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play” (280) points to the same infinite deferral as Barthes’s essay. The author as originator of a text, challenged by Barthes, corresponds to Derrida’s definition of the center as something that “orient[s], balance[s], and
organize[s] the structure” (278), as a structure’s “origin” or “purpose” (279). Barthes’s “death of the author” and Derrida’s de-centering are therefore quite similar. The removal of the author from the equation in Barthes’s essay illustrates Derrida’s point that the absence of the center “extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely” (280).

In Barthes’s *S/Z*, in which he reiterates and expands both the notion of the multiplicity of writing and of the deferral of meaning, the difference from the paranoid reader becomes especially clear. In the writable (*scriptible*) text, the reader becomes, as Barthes has it, “a producer of the text” (4). In the endless production of meaning, in which there cannot be one stable core, the attempt to decrypt and extract one determinable message from the text is simply out of place: “If we want to remain attentive to the plural of a text (however limited it may be), we must renounce structuring this text in large masses …: no construction of the text: everything signifies ceaselessly and several times but without being delegated to a great final ensemble, to an ultimate structure” (Barthes, *S/Z* 11-12). Any interpretation, Barthes writes, must therefore be “separated from any ideology of totality” (*S/Z* 15). For the critics of the Yale School, it is a similar resistance to totality that calls for a deconstructive reading. In “The Critic as Host,” Miller notes that “Deconstruction attempts to resist the totalizing and totalitarian tendencies of criticism. It attempts to resist its own tendencies to come to rest in some sense of mastery over

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19 Jacques Lacan, who also gave a talk at the 1966 Johns Hopkins conference, should also be mentioned here. His notion of “the self’s radical excentricity” (*Écrits* 171), along with the conviction that neither the conscious nor the unconscious mind presents unity, shows clear parallels to Derrida’s de-centering. M.A.R. Habib’s description of Lacan’s notion of the unconscious makes the connection with Derrida especially evident: “like the conscious mind, [the unconscious] is without a center, without an essence, without a psychological substratum; it is nothing more than a series of positions it occupies in language, a series of positions that can only artificially and for convenience be coerced into identity as a ‘subject,’ and, with even more coercion, molded into the coherence of an ego or self” (99).

20 See also Geoffrey Hartman’s *Criticism in the Wilderness*, in which he discusses “forms of critical commentary … that challenge the dichotomy of reading and writing” (20).

21 Other critics that could be mentioned here are Jean-François Lyotard and his definition of “postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives” (xxiv) in *The Postmodern Condition*, or Geoffrey Hartman, who, in his article “Literary Criticism and its Discontents,” expresses a similar distrust of master theories claiming to speak the truth: “There is no Divine or Dialectical Science which can help us purify history absolutely” (212).
the work” (252). Instead of leading to “some transcendent and universal Truth with a capital T,” each act of reading only “is another exemplification of the law of unreadability” (Miller, *Ethics* 53).22 All texts, writes Miller, are therefore “‘unreadable,’ if by ‘readable’ one means a single, definitive interpretation” (“Host” 226).

What is the place of criticism when all texts are ultimately “unreadable”? For Barthes, interpretation should be an appreciation of a text’s plurality, a celebration of multiplicity: “The commentary, based on the affirmation of the plural, cannot therefore work with ‘respect’ to the text; the tutor text will ceaselessly be broken, interrupted without any regard for its natural divisions …; the work of the commentary … consists precisely in *manhandling* the text, *interrupting* it” (*S/Z* 15). All of the above critics “interrupt” texts in their interpretations and fall into the category of the doubtful reader. They are disillusioned readers lost in “a wilderness of ambivalent symbols and indirect signs” (Hartman, “Discontents” 216), who have given up faith in the possibility of finding a “center” and who therefore neither believe in closure nor in totalizing interpretations. The concepts of intertextuality, free play of signifiers, and infinite deferral, while still showing some remnants of the connectivist stance of the paranoid reader, are used as examples by the doubtful reader in order to show that it is impossible to gain mastery over a text. As such, the doubtful reader is a radical further stage of the hermeneutics of suspicion: disillusioned, but also “disillusioning” in the challenging of truth, totality, completeness, and authority. While it is not easy to subsume the various critics listed here under a common political banner, Vincent Leitch ascribes “[a]n obvious anarchistic temper” (*Theory* 11) to their readings. Geoffrey Hartman’s description of the liberating qualities of such criticism can be seen as a continuation of concerns of the political movements of the preceding decade:

22 Miller says the same thing about de Man: “for de Man all texts are allegories of their own unreadability” (“Reading” 155).
“We want to have our say despite or within authoritative pressures coming from the great writers of the past, institutions asking us to conform to a community model, politics that limit subtly or by force what can be said and written” (“Discontents” 217). In the atmosphere of doubt, disillusionment, and insecurity, it is only fitting that the dominant reading paradigm should emphasize randomness, undecidability, and infinite deferral. The doubtful reader is therefore not only the result of the New Left entering the academy but also a response to the insecurities and instabilities faced in real life.

d. Hope: The Me Decade and Reader-response Criticism

If Barthes’s “Death of the Author” anticipated the nihilism, suspicion, and the void of infinite deferral, it also signaled the shift of critical attention towards the reader and with it the emergence of a more “hopeful” group: reader-response critics. While the way for this kind of criticism had been paved long before Barthes’s essay by for example Roman Ingarden or Hans Georg Gadamer, Barthes “promoted an empowerment of the reader hitherto unseen in literary discourse,” as Littau rightly points out (104). Significantly, this empowerment of the reader occurs at a time in American social history when the turn to personal preoccupations and self-help marked a visible turn away from the political Sixties. The turn of critical attention towards the reader in reception theory and reader-response criticism constitutes, I would argue, a paradigmatic move of the “Me Decade” and is therefore just as much an expression of the zeitgeist as the disillusionment and radical doubt of the doubtful reader.

As the New Left turned into the Academic Left (Hoeveler 36), the late 1960s radicalization of many political groups, including the civil rights movement or the gay rights

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23 See also Terry Eagleton’s *Literary Theory*, in which he organizes the development of modern literary theory into three very broad stages: “a preoccupation with the author (Romanticism and the nineteenth century); an exclusive concern with the text (New Criticism); and a marked shift of attention to the reader over recent years” (74).
movement, made way to disillusionment and disappointment. A visible trend of depoliticization during the Seventies even led some commentators to argue that large parts of the Sixties protest movements had never been that political to begin with but had adopted the countercultural stance as a means to express individuality. Irving Howe, for example, had already noted in 1965 that “[t]he small minority that does rebel tends to adopt a stance that seems to be political, sometimes even ideological, but often turns out to be little more than an effort to assert a personal style” (“New Styles” 43). Similarly, Arthur Marwick believes that “many other counter-cultural activities owed far more to self-indulgence than to serious protest against established ways of doing things” (803). By the end of the decade, “self-indulgence” had become for many a keyword for describing the root of all evil that had befallen the nation. In the above mentioned “crisis of confidence” speech, President Carter noted that “too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption” (390). Tom Wolfe’s article about the “Me Decade” in 1976 and Christopher Lasch’s 1978 book *The Culture of Narcissism* discuss similar issues.

Considering the international shocks, the political scandals, and the economic hardships, the argument went, it is not surprising that large parts of the public turned away from the idealism and optimism of the Sixties and focused on something closer to home: themselves. Wolfe therefore famously dubbed the 1970s the “Me Decade,” claiming that the religious and spiritual boom, the narcissism, and the self-indulgence of the decade are all closely related. With the changes of notions of race, gender, and sexuality came more uncertainties. “Even for those who supported [the] movements for equality or who benefited from them,” write Bailey and Farber, “the changes were often disorienting” (*Seventies* 5). The retreat to the self and the focus on one’s own issues, seen from this perspective, constitutes a move towards the known. Despite the economic crisis, Wolfe suggests that the “Me Decade” is also the result of the growing prosperity
after World War II: “ordinary folks now had enough money to take it and run off and alter the circumstances of their lives and create new roles for themselves” (143). Accordingly, self-help books came to make up around 15% of all books sold during the decade (Bailey and Farber, Seventies 6), and New Age movements, self-help seminars (such as the ones offered by Werner Erhard), and the sex industry²⁵ flourished. Lasch’s The Culture of Narcissism, which was at the same time overtly critical of contemporary society and in its apocalyptic tone an apparent product of its times, is a clear indicator of this zeitgeist. His ardent critique of contemporary America leaves no stone unturned: from politics to sports to education to personal relationships—in Lasch’s view everything had gone (or was going) downhill. The attempt in The Culture of Narcissism to explain the retreat to the self and the depoliticization unifies both Wolfe’s notion of the “Me Decade” and Carter’s worrying about increasing self-indulgence:

After the political turmoil of the sixties, Americans have retreated to purely personal preoccupations. Having no hope of improving their lives in any of the ways that matter, people have convinced themselves that what matters is psychic self-improvement: getting in touch with their feelings, eating health food, taking lessons in ballet or belly-dancing, immersing themselves in the wisdom of the East, jogging, learning how to “relate,” overcoming the “fear of pleasure.” (Lasch 4)

The active creation of new roles apparent in Lasch’s quote, and also mentioned by Wolfe, corresponds to the new role of the reader Barthes finds in the writable text. Instead of being the

²⁴ One literal example of creating new roles for oneself is the popular role playing game Dungeons & Dragons, developed in the early Seventies and brought on the market in 1974. Kelly Sagert notes that the success of the game during the decade reflects an understandable attempt to escape from reality “during a decade of disillusionment such as the 1970s” (136).

²⁵ See for example Peter Braunstein’s interesting article “‘Adults Only.’ The Construction of an Erotic City in New York during the 1970s,” published in Bailey and Farber, Seventies, 129-56.
dupe of an Author-God, the reader, as envisioned by Barthes, creates new roles for himself and emancipates himself not only from the real-life uncertainty and disillusionment of contemporary society but also from the hermeneutical uncertainty faced by the paranoid reader.26 Against this background, the turn of critical attention towards the reader in reception theory and reader-response criticism appears as a paradigmatic move of the “Me Decade.”

While the paranoid reader, as the example of Stencil and Oedipa has shown, is constantly confronted with the possibility of being wrong, of misinterpreting, or of hopelessly reducing the “plural” of a text, the reader-response critics move beyond such worries. Similar to the doubtful reader, these critics have adopted the view that there is not one fixed meaning in a text “that can be extracted from a text like the coal from a hillside,” as Robert C. Allen puts it (74). Rather, meaning is constructed in the reader’s mind. Wolfgang Iser, for example, writes in The Act of Reading: “it is in the reader that that a text comes to life” (19). The proximity of reader-response criticism to the doubtful reader is also made clear in Iser’s remark that in the face of the “inexhaustibility of the text” (Implied 280), any response will only be one of many possible ways of reading. Reader-response criticism thus moves away from the paranoid reader’s attempt to find a definite and unchangeable message. At the same time, Iser notes in The Implied Reader that individual readers are always striving “to fit everything together in a consistent pattern” (283). Reader-response criticism can thus be considered a transitional stage between the paranoid and the doubtful reader. While it constitutes a clear move beyond the paranoid reader—perhaps even into a realm where in Pynchon’s own words “[t]ruth of falsity don’t apply” (V. 123)—it does not share the radical suspicion of the doubtful reader: reader-response critics are much more

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26 This emancipation is polemically expressed in Barthes’s often quoted closing sentence: “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (“Death” 148).
“hopeful” in the sense that for them texts are always readable and that readers are in charge of their own fate.

If a text comes to life in each individual reader and if there is no stable meaning in the text, then how does this not lead to what Stanley Fish calls “interpretive anarchy” (172)? The way in which Iser, Hans Robert Jauss, and Fish answer this question shows that Iser and Jauss are much closer to the position of the paranoid reader than Fish who shares certain convictions with the doubtful reader. Despite acknowledging the “inexhaustibility of the text” (Implied 280), Iser does not look into an infinite abyss of endlessly deferred meaning: the text, he believes, still predetermines and guides a given range of possible readings. A text therefore, as Iser notes in the introduction to The Implied Reader, prestructures its potential meaning (xii). The process of reading is thus—Iser follows Ingarden’s phenomenology here—the Konkretisierung (realization or actualization) of the schemata provided by the text. While it is up to the reader to fill in the blanks in a creative process, for Iser, “the written text imposes certain limits on its unwritten implications in order to prevent these from becoming too blurred and hazy” (Implied 276). He expands this in his essay “Interaction between Text and Reader,” in which he claims that there are “guiding devices operative in the reading process” (110). While Iser believes that the literary work comes into existence only in the interaction of text and reader, there is still something in the text which guides the reading. For Jauss, similarly, a text “predisposes its readers to a very definite type of reception by textual strategies, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristic or implicit allusions” (12).27 It needs to be noted that if there are textual guiding devices, there is implicitly also the possibility to misread them and therefore right and wrong ways to read a text.

27 Jauss writes: “the specific reception which the author anticipates from the reader for a particular work can be achieved, even if the explicit signals are missing, by three generally acceptable means: first, by the familiar standards of the inherent poetry of the genre; second, by the implicit relationships to familiar works of the literary-historical context; and third, by the contrast between fiction and reality, between the poetic and the practical function of language” (14).
Susan Suleiman rightly sees a contradiction in Iser: “the question of how much freedom a reader has is eluded, or rather answered in contradictory ways” (24-25).

Jauss’s notion of the individual readers’ Erwartungshorizont, the horizon of cultural, historical, moral, or literary expectations of readers, constitutes a move away from the notion of guiding devices in a text towards recognition of external factors. This is more or less what Fish acknowledges in his concept of “interpretive communities.” How a reader reads a text is entirely determined by shared interpretive strategies or conventions. “[T]hese strategies,” writes Fish, “exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around” (171). Since these strategies are communal rather than individual, they keep reading from dissolving into anarchy. At the same time, this of course means that there is no correct or incorrect reading—only readings that are shared or accepted within a given community. Unlike Iser and Jauss, Fish rejects the notion that a text includes encoded reading directions. Meaning, for Fish, is therefore not something that is in the text and which has to be extracted by the reader: “the reader’s response,” he writes, “is not to the meaning; it is the meaning” (3). In preaching “the instability of the text and the unavailability of determinate meanings” (305), Fish appears not only closer to the position of the doubtful reader than Iser and Jauss but also seems to offer a good description of the infamous difficulty or “unreadability” of Gravity’s Rainbow.

e. The Slothrop in All of Us

The difficulty and complexity of Gravity’s Rainbow are perhaps its most often noted features. Characterized an “encyclopedic narrative” by Edward Mendelson (161), it requires at

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28 Suleiman sees difficulties in constructing such an Erwartungshorizont, rightly emphasizing “the possibility of different horizons of expectations co-existing among different publics in any one society” (37).
times (literally) a rocket scientist to make sense of it and stands as a polyphonic and enigmatic Tower of Babel. When one of the novel’s characters, Brigadier Pudding, asks himself, “Who can find his way about this lush maze of initials” (78), he may therefore very well be referring to the text of *Gravity’s Rainbow* itself—its maze-like structure and the flood of acronyms (BOQ, FRCS, OKW, MMPI, CBI, NISO, SPOG, WLB, among many others). Just as *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49,* *Gravity’s Rainbow* seems continually to speak to its readers. Several comments in the novel appear to be directed at us or to reflect our experience of reading it. Katje’s bewilderment at Osbie Feel’s movie, which “runs out in the middle of an ‘uh…’” (Pynchon, *GR* 544), may reflect our own bewilderment at the novel which ends similarly abruptly. Similarly, the drug-induced hallucinations of another character sound like a description of the novel and our reaction to it: “a twisting of yarns or cordage, a giant web a wrenching of hide, of muscles in the hard grip of something, that comes to wrestle when the night is deep … and a sense, too, of visitation by the dead, afterward a sick feeling that they are not as friendly as they seemed to be … he has wakened, cried, sought explanation, but no one ever told him anything he could believe” (Pynchon, *GR* 155).

*Gravity’s Rainbow* thus transposes a central aspect of *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49* into the Seventies: not only are its characters engaged in the activity of reading, but we as readers experience the same problems and frustrations. Slothrop’s eventual breaking under the proliferation of plots, connections, and dead ends may not only reflect our own frustration with *Gravity’s Rainbow* but also shows Slothrop as representative example of concurrent critical concerns. While Slothrop is often put into one category with Stencil and Oedipa because of the paranoia attributed to all three characters, I argue that he illustrates a clear move beyond the paranoid reader. Slothrop’s progress through his reading environment, the Zone, mirrors both our
own progress through *Gravity's Rainbow* and the environment of academic reading in the 1970s. The fragmentation of Slothrop and the description of the Zone as a de-centered, postmodern space are reflected in both form and content of the novel and should constitute a warning for (paranoid) readers looking for truth and clarity. We are warned, for example, that “[t]hose like Slothrop, with the greatest interest in discovering the truth, [will be] thrown back on dreams, psychic flashes, omens, cryptographies, drug-epistemologies, all dancing on a ground of terror, contradiction, absurdity” (592).

f. Slothrop’s Move Beyond the Paranoid Reader

We read about Slothrop’s map before we encounter the character: he keeps track of his sexual encounters across London during World War II by putting stars on a map. There seems to be a certain obsessiveness about him that recalls Stencil and Oedipa. Not surprisingly, it does not take long after Slothrop’s initial appearance in the novel, and there is talk about paranoia and “some horrible secret plot” (Pynchon, *GR* 22). On a walk through rocket-bombed London, Slothrop reads the destroyed buildings as “sermon[s] on vanity” (Pynchon, *GR* 25). The ruins seem to hold a message about transience for him: “turn any corner and he can find himself in a parable” (25). All the ingredients for a paranoid reader are there. In the beginning of the novel, Slothrop appears as an uncoverer of meaning who unites in himself characteristics of the main protagonists of Pynchon’s first two novels. He “has the inborn gift of selecting the wrong gear for all occasions” (Pynchon, *GR* 317), which makes him a schlemihl like Profane. He shares with Stencil the quest for uncovering the past and with Oedipa the suspicion of being the victim of some plot. Just like Stencil and Oedipa before him, Slothrop commences to go on a quest to untangle all connections and solve the mystery after he comes across references to a material
called Imipolex G and a mysterious S-Gerät (or Schwarzgerät) in retrieved documents about the German rocket. When he first enters “The Zone”—Germany during the immediate aftermath of World War II—he is optimistic that his quest will lead to some revelation. Like Oedipa and Stencil, he hunts for clues and is out to discover the truth.

However, if we take Slothrop at his word and read his quest as a parable, it becomes clear that he shows an important departure from Oedipa and Stencil: what initially looks like yet another version of the paranoid reader, eventually takes a turn that is representative of reading concerns of the Seventies. While he begins to suspect early on that “They” are controlling his fate and initially tries to find out what They are up to (for example by involving Their delegate Sir Stephen Dodson-Truck in a drinking game in order to make him talk), the question “Is he drifting, or being led?” (Pynchon, GR 566) stops being of importance to him. Two significant differences between Stencil/Oedipa and Slothrop become apparent: first, Slothrop considers the plot against him so much as a given that he accepts it as status quo. Paranoia, for him, is a default mode that is actually warranted. “They” are indeed after him: not only is there a “Slothrop Group” at the British secret service (Pynchon, GR 230), there are also “scores of others” keeping an eye on him (Pynchon, GR 397). Slothrop therefore “lets it happen” (Pynchon, GR 213) and, while trying to avoid the various parties that are after him, does not attempt to find out why exactly they are out to get him. Second, he starts to suspect that there may not be a message at the end. Upon entering the Zone, Slothrop becomes aware that “what shows up inside the empty

29 Both turn out to make up a contraption used by Captain Blicero (the SS code name for Lieutenant Weissmann who was a party guest at Foppl’s Siege Party in V.) to launch his slave Gottfried onboard a V-2 rocket.
30 The catch-all word in the novel which several characters use to denote sinister opposing forces: malicious conspirators, the Rocket Cartel, or the military-industrial complex.
31 With Slothrop we have thus arrived at the embodiment of the sentiment, “Just because you’re paranoid, doesn’t mean that they’re not out to get you.” There is certainly a lot of talk about paranoia in Gravity’s Rainbow (perhaps more than in all other Pynchon novels taken together), there are plots (imagined and real) to be decrypted, mysteries to be solved (What is the Schwarzgerät? What is the Kirghiz Light? Who is the Kenosha Kid?), and connections to be made. “To paranoid” even becomes a verb: “Slothrop paranoids from door to door looking for one that might have something to tell him” (257).
circle in his brain might string together into a message, might not” (Pynchon, *GR* 287). Whereas, as several critics have pointed out, Stencil’s hunt for V. resembles the quest for the grail (Cowart 129-31, Hite 78-79), Slothrop eventually admits to himself that “The Schwarzgerät is no Grail … And you are not knightly hero” (Pynchon, *GR* 370). He is convinced that it is all some “evil game” and is just playing along because he has “nothing better to do” (Pynchon, *GR* 370). He is not driven anymore, like Oedipa or Stencil or the paranoid reader, to decode a message; he just tags along. His quest for Imipolex and the *Schwarzgerät* becomes increasingly less important. While Oedipa and Stencil have a clear goal in mind—unmasking the truth—Slothrop’s quest fragments into several unrelated subquests: retrieve hashish for Säure Bummer, help a boy find his pet lemming, assist villagers in Northern Germany during their annual “Schweinheldfest,” and acquire documents to get out of the Zone. Clearly, his quest once again reflects Prentice’s phrase from the beginning of the novel: it is not a disentanglement, but a progressive knotting into.

The departure from the paranoid reader made clear in Slothrop’s admittance to himself that he is just playing along is reiterated by Slothrop’s turning “anti-paranoid” in the second half of the novel: “Slothrop and the S-Gerät and the Jamf/Imipolex mystery have grown to be strangers. He hasn’t really thought about them in a while … right now Slothrop feels himself sliding onto the anti-paranoid part of his cycle, feels the whole city around him going back roofless, vulnerable, uncentered as he is” (Pynchon, *GR* 441). If paranoia has a reassuring quality as Hertzberg and McClelland have pointed out (52), then Slothrop’s accepting anti-paranoia and opening up himself to being vulnerable and uncomforted means that he is facing what Stencil and Oedipa have tried to avoid: the void. He has stopped trying to find a definite message at the end of his quest and he “won’t interpret” whatever signals he comes across (Pynchon, *GR* 577).
In short, he has ceased to be a paranoid reader. Significantly, his “Partial List of Wishes on Evening Stars for This Period” (Pynchon, *GR* 562) does not include a single reference to any of his initial quests. Rather, it reflects the fragmentation into several unrelated and mostly directionless subquests. The falling apart of Slothrop’s quest, along with the terminology of “roofless, vulnerable, uncentered” mentioned above, anticipates Slothrop’s fate at the end of the novel: he fragments, scatters, or, if you will, becomes de-centered. What had been hinted at several times (Pynchon, *GR* 368, 385, 498-99, 634) finally comes to pass: “At last … he becomes a cross himself, a crossroads, a living intersection” (Pynchon, *GR* 637). From that point on Slothrop more or less disappears from the narrative. His fate, we read “is not so clear” (Pynchon, *GR* 702). When the narrator notes that Slothrop “was sent into the Zone to be present at his own assembly — perhaps … his time’s assembly” (Pynchon, *GR* 752), we can, by analogy, say that in witnessing Slothrop’s scattering we read about his time’s disassembly. Slothrop thus becomes, like Stencil and Oedipa before him, representative of his time—in this case of the fragmentation, death of the subject, dissolution of meaning, and de-centering of poststructuralism.

**g. Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold:** Thematic and Structural De-centering

The fragmentation of the novel’s main character does not bode well for the other elements of the novel. If the rocket is somewhat of a thematic center of *Gravity’s Rainbow*—it is, after all, the “holy Center” (Pynchon, *GR* 517) towards which Slothrop, the Russian agent Tchitcherine, the *Schwarzkommando* of “Zone Hereros,” and others are drawn—it could be argued that the proliferation of other topics, including Kabbalist mythology, astrology, deviant sexuality, or anarchism, constitutes de-centering on a thematic level. This is continued in the
narrative structure and the plot of the novel. Thematically and structurally, the novel is, in the words of one of Pynchon’s characters, continually “flying outward” (GR 173).

The suspension of order and hierarchy apparent from the beginning in the absence of chapter numbers is intensified by the juxtaposition of segments related by a third-person narrator and segments reflecting the thoughts or dreams of characters. Usually the focus shifts without introduction or indication of which character’s perspective the narrative adopts. The first two and a half pages of the novel are a good example: Gravity’s Rainbow starts with an account of the chaotic evacuation of a dark city leaving the reader unsure whether these are real or imagined events, whether they are told by an omniscient narrator, or whether they are someone’s thoughts. The simple sentence “But it is already light” (Pynchon, GR 5) switches the narrative from this ambiguous episode to the reality of the novel: a winter morning in London during World War II. Not until several pages later do we learn that the opening pages were one of Prentice’s visions due to his “Condition”: his ability to get “inside the fantasies of others” (Pynchon, GR 12). This kind of shifting of narrative perspective and narrative “reality” continues throughout the entire text. However, the narrative situation, although it is oscillating between different styles, different focal characters, and different levels of consciousness (“real,” dreamed, imagined, hallucinated), is still relatively constant in the first three parts of the novel. It always returns to a center: a third-person narrator relating an ongoing story about several characters’ experiences during the months leading up to and following the end of World War II. The same can be said about the plot: despite all subplots, dream passages, analepses, and drug-induced hallucinations, there are still several determinable main plots: Slothrop’s progress through Europe, Roger and

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32 Some of the more unusual points of view in Gravity’s Rainbow are, for example, Prentice’s vision of the giant adenoid attacking London (15-17), Slothrop’s Sodium Amytal-induced hallucinated trip down a toilet (63-72), the thoughts of Webley Silvernail’s rats (232), Katje and Pirate in hell (546-58), and the story of Byron the Bulb (660-68).
Jessica’s (anti-) love story, Pointsman’s plotting, and Pökler’s role in the Verein für Raumschiffahrt, for example.

This more or less centered plot or narrative is lost in Part IV of the novel: while the story still follows several main characters (Roger Mexico, Katje, Tchitcherine), the novel increasingly fragments. The sixth and the last section of Part IV are divided into sometimes quizzical subsections. Chronological order is for the most part suspended, there is not always a determinable focal character or narrator, the point of view and style change at a bewildering pace, and the novel ends in mid-song. Apart from the launch sequence of the rocket and from Slothrop, who fades in and out of some of the passages, there is no logical, chronological, or narrative order or connection. On both the level of plot and narration, the novel thus accomplishes two things: it mirrors Slothrop’s scattering, and it confronts its readers with Slothrop’s “anti-paranoia.” If paranoia is the comforting feeling that everything is connected and that all clues (plots, signs, signifiers) are leading somewhere, anti-paranoia is the bleak sense of either unconnectedness or of not being able to sort events into a coherent whole. With Slothrop’s scattering the novel itself fragments and confronts its readers with de-centered fragments. Both Slothrop and the reader of the novel are thus granted a look into the void.

h. The Zone: Reading between Doubt and Hope

Our experience of reading the novel is mirrored in the descriptions of the Zone. The novel’s increasing fragmentation is anticipated, for example, by an observation by the Schwarzkommando’s leader Enzian: “Separations are proceeding. Each alternative Zone speeds away from all the others, in fated acceleration, red-shifting, fleeing the Center” (Pynchon, GR 528). Descriptions such as this make the Zone appear as a distinctly postmodern “space” and
serve to establish it, I would argue, not only as a reflection of the novel as a whole but also as a metaphor for reading in times of poststructuralist theory and reader-response criticism.

The chaos in Germany in the immediate aftermath of World War II, lasting at least until the establishment of the Allied Control Council in August 1945, if not longer than that, provides the perfect setting for Pynchon. The historical stage of occupied Germany is transformed into the postmodern Zone whose not-quite-real quality is emphasized from the beginning: the *Wizard of Oz* quote in the epigraph of Part III, “Toto, I have a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore…” (Pynchon, *GR* 283), indicates the unreal, magical, or metaphorical quality of both the Zone and *Gravity’s Rainbow* itself. If Kansas represents the real world, order, and, say, traditional novelistic structure, then Oz/the Zone/*Gravity’s Rainbow* constitutes a reading environment radically different from that of the paranoid reader. While the paranoid reader strives for organization and clarity, the Zone is characterized by “a great frontierless streaming” (Pynchon, *GR* 558)—frontiers and boundaries have ceased to matter. It is chaotic, multi-national, polyphonic, open, and de-centered. The efforts of the paranoid reader to impose order or to find stable meaning at the bottom of a text are negated from the beginning. Soon after Slothrop enters the Zone, the narrator remarks: “Slothrop, though he doesn’t know it yet, is as properly constituted a state as any other in the Zone these days. Not paranoia. Just how it is. Temporary alliances, knit and undone” (Pynchon, *GR* 295). There is no set methodology to navigate through the Zone and paranoia amounts to nothing more than one among many ways to explain the world—no more or less valid than others. The Zone thus illustrates not only Knight’s observation that “[b]y the mid-1970s the sheen of conspiracy theory as a bright new political attitude had grown dull with frequent use” (Pynchon, *GR* 33) but also Paul Feyerabend’s

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33 Many critics have pointed out that *Gravity’s Rainbow* represents a new kind of text. Khachig Tololyan, for example, notes that it is “not a novel in the usual sense of the word” (“War” 31). See also Edward Mendelson: “To refer to it as a novel is convenient, but to read it as a novel … is to misconstrue it” (“Encyclopedia” 161).
description of a postmodern “Anything Goes.” In his article of the same name, Feyerabend writes:

The idea of a fixed method, or a fixed theory of rationality, rests on too naive a view on man and his social surroundings. To those who look at the rich material provided by history, and who are not intent on impoverishing it in order to please their lower instincts, their craving for intellectual security in the form of clarity, precision, ‘objectivity’, ‘truth’, it will become clear that there is only one principle that can be defended under all circumstances and in all stages of human development. It is the principle: anything goes. (199-200)

The parallels between Pynchon’s Zone and the “zone” of the critical scene of the 1970s are apparent. Feyerabend’s challenging of clarity, objectivity, and truth shows not only the above mentioned “anarchistic temper” Leitch has ascribed to the deconstructionists but certainly also brings to mind Derrida’s “Structure, Sign and Play.” Derrida’s conviction that “in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse” (280) exposes what Lyotard would call metanarratives—history, the self, and truth, for example—as constructs of language and renders the quest of the paranoid reader absurd.

i. Doubtful Readers

The de-centered Zone therefore not only reiterates Slothrop’s move beyond the paranoid reader but also illustrates central concerns of the doubtful reader. Both form and content of *Gravity’s Rainbow* illustrate keywords such as deferral of meaning or unreadability. That language is a central part of the novel’s preoccupation with these issues is made very clear early
As Slothrop is exploring the rocket assembly site in Nordhausen, Germany, the narrator notes that “here in the Zone categories have been blurred badly. The status of the name you miss, love, and search for now has grown ambiguous and remote” (Pynchon, *GR* 308). Both Slothrop and we as readers are confronted with ambiguity and remoteness of meaning.

In addition to the challenges posed by the shifting points of view or by the absence of indicators as to who is speaking, we are confronted with dense and often ambiguous prose. In other places it is punctuation or accentuation, which leads to a lack of clarity, as is the case whenever Hungarian scientists Rószavölgyi opens his mouth. He states, for example: “The subject can *fal*-sify, consciously, or repress, *un* -consciously. But with the project-tive technique, nothing he can do, con-scius or otherwise, can pre-vent us, from finding what we wish, to know” (Pynchon, *GR* 83). The massive amounts of acronyms, the snippets from various languages or mathematical formulas only add to our problems when trying to decode the language of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. The narrator’s dry remark about the hashish-induced madness at a party in Monte Carlo may very well mirror a recurring experience of *Gravity’s Rainbow’s* readership: “What’s happening is not clear” (Pynchon, *GR* 247). That this kind of confusion is meant to be experienced by the reader is illustrated by a short narrative intermission early on in Part III: during a digressive description of the chaos in Nordhausen’s Mittelwerke, the word “Imipolex G” is mentioned, upon which someone (a fictionalized reader perhaps?) interjects “Wait—which one of them was thinking that?” (Pynchon, *GR* 302). It is the exact same question that we repeatedly find ourselves confronted with. The fact that this question is incorporated into the text shows that it is both anticipated and forced upon us by the novel. As such, the question

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34 Again, Derrida. In “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” he argues that decentering also means that “language invaded the universal problematic” (280).
constitutes a metalinguistic comment formulating our difficulty of reducing the text to an unambiguous reading. *Gravity’s Rainbow* is thus a perfect example for Miller’s concept of “unreadability”: “The ‘unreadability’ (if there is such a word) of a text is more than an experience of unease in the reader, the result of his failure to reduce the text to a homogeneous reading. It is also thematized in the text itself in the form of metalinguistic statements” (31).

Significantly, the question of “who was thinking that?” goes unanswered—instead, “the target slips away” (Pynchon, *GR* 302). We are left with “unreadability” and ambiguity instead of clarity. This “slipping away” or deferral of meaning on a linguistic level, can be observed on the level of plot in the episode of the mechanical chess player and in Slothrop’s variation on the Kenosha Kid sentence.

Marcel, the mechanical chess player who appears towards the end of the novel in a surreal episode resembling superhero comics, responds to the phrase “Hey man gimme some skin, man!” by first talking about “skin in all its implications,” after which he moves on to “a long discourse on the concept of ‘give,’ that goes on for a while, then, then he starts on ‘Man’” (Pynchon, *GR* 688). This is more than merely a comical take on Marcel’s problem of being “much too literal with humans” (Pynchon, *GR* 688). On the one hand, it shows the importance of context for interpretation (and thus represents a nod at interpretive communities and the *Erwartungshorizont*). On the other hand, it illustrates important linguistic considerations. In terms of de Saussurean linguistics, Marcel examines the sentence paradigmatically instead of syntagmatically. He is concerned with (intertextual) substitutions that are absent from the text. His preoccupation with language leads in his case not only to the literal deferral of meaning but also exemplifies, admittedly in an absurd way, Kristeva’s notion of language as being double. Kristeva’s concept of poetic language replacing the 0-1 sequence of modern logic, in which
meaning is either 0 ("nothing") or 1 ("something," “truth”), with a 0-2 system, which expresses her conviction that “the minimal unit of poetic language is at least double, not in the sense of the signifier/signified dyad, but in terms of one and other” (Kristeva 41), essentially points toward the same deferral of meaning. This conception of poetic language—and here we come back to the openness of the Zone, to Derrida’s de-centering, and Feyerabend’s resistance to closure—denies determinable and stable meaning. Kristeva writes, “the notions of definition, determination, the sign ‘=’ and the very concept of sign, which presuppose a vertical (hierarchical) division between signifier and signified, cannot be applied to poetic language—by definition an infinity of pairings and combinations” (40).

If Kristeva, Derrida, and others are primarily concerned with the paradigmatic axis, the following episode shows that even on a syntagmatic level language is not stable, and thus illustrates ideas of both poststructuralists and reader-response critics. As Slothrop is awaiting an experiment in London’s St.Veronica’s Hospital, he plays around with the phrase “You never did the Kenosha Kid”:

You never did. The Kenosha Kid …

Bet you never did the “Kenosha,” kid! …

Bet you never did the “Kenosha Kid.” …

You! never did the Kenosha Kid think for one instant that you… …

You? Never! Did the Kenosha Kid think for one instant that you…? …

You never did ’the,’ Kenosha Kid! (Pynchon, GR 62)

If we consider the original sentence as the product of an author and Slothrop’s variations as his reading of it, we are not only reminded of his move beyond the paranoid reader (rather than

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35 A literal application of this idea can be found in Edward Pointsman and Roger Mexico. Behavioral scientist and bad guy Pointsman, we read, “can only posses the zero and the one” (Pynchon, GR 56). It is Roger Mexico, who later joins the Counterforce, who “belongs to the space in between” (Pynchon, GR 56).
trying to find one definite message, he emphasizes the sentence’s instability and variability) but also of Barthes’s argument in “The Death of the Author” that each literary text constitutes a multiplicity of meaning over which the author has no real influence. On the one hand, the Kenosha Kid sentence therefore illustrates the doubtful reader’s conviction that it is impossible to reduce a given text to a definite, “eternal” message. The openness of the sentence is mirrored in the openness of the Zone and again in the textual openness we as readers of Gravity’s Rainbow encounter. Both content and form thus emphasize “undecidability” and language’s instability and resist our attempts to subsume it into, in Barthes’s words, “a great final ensemble” (S/Z 12).

On the other hand, Slothrop’s playing around with the sentence illustrates Iser’s conception of the reader as actively contributing to the creation of meaning and underscores the importance of the interpreter. Rather than being something to be extracted from the text, meaning is, as Iser argues, only created in the interaction between reader and text as “the product of the reader’s mind working on the raw material of the text” (Implied 278). The sentence “You never did the Kenosha Kid” shows this quite well: it is what Iser would call the “artistic pole,” the text created by the author, while Slothrop’s reading is the “aesthetic pole,” “the realization accomplished by the reader” (Implied 274). Meaning is only generated in the convergence of the two poles, in the interaction between reader and text.

j. The Rorschach Text: Hope

If the notion that the reader is an active producer of meaning is a ray of hope among the infinite deferral and undecidability of the Zone, it immediately seems to be crushed in that

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36 Umberto Eco essentially says the same thing in his “Postscript to The Name of the Rose.” He writes, for example, “Nothing is of greater consolation to the author of a novel than the discovery of readings he had not conceived but which are then prompted by his readers” (506).
*Gravity’s Rainbow* obviously challenges certain premises of Iser’s and Jauss’s theories. Especially the notion of “guiding devices” (Iser, “Interaction” 110) or “overt and covert signals” (Jauss, “Literary Theory” 12) is carried to an absurd extreme. If anything, the overproliferation of clues, allusions, acronyms, and plots, in combination with the indeterminacy in narrative structure and content, point towards something like Miller’s notion of a text “performing on itself the act of deconstruction without any help from the critic” (“Deconstructing” 31). I argue, however, that *Gravity’s Rainbow* does not challenge the attempt to find meaning per se. As *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49* before, it makes us both observers of and participators in an experiment not unlike Rószavölgyi’s projective text: “when given an unstruc-tured stimulus, some shape-less blob of exper-ience, the subject, will seek to impose, struc-ture on it” (83). If Pynchon’s first two novels make us Stencils (or Oedipas), in reading *Gravity’s Rainbow* we become Slothrops in that we are confronted with a stimulus or “blob” (*Gravity’s Rainbow*), which we then structure with our interpretation. This implies that there is, like in a Rorschach test, no stable or fixed meaning to be uncovered.\(^{37}\) Meaning is, as the reader-response critics claim, produced by the reader who is guided by certain expectations or conventions. Jauss’s conviction that the reception theorist can reconstruct the cultural, historical, moral, or literary expectations of readers at a given time (Jauss 12-13) is reflected in Rószavölgyi’s belief that the projective test will reveal Slothrop’s needs and hopes (83). As such, *Gravity’s Rainbow* acknowledges two important premises of reader-response criticism: the individual reader’s need for structure and the existence of interpretive communities.

\(^{37}\) That this analogy reduces the author to the producer of ink blots is certainly furthering Barthes’s “The Death of the Author.” The fact that *Gravity’s Rainbow* is quite an elaborated ink blot, however, should also make us think about the role of the author in the production of meaning.
Iser’s conviction that a reader is always striving for unity and consistency (Implied 285)\(^{38}\) is confirmed not only by most critics’ attempts to subdue the novel to their reading but also, again, by my Meinelizing in which I am, admittedly, also aiming for unity and consistency. As readers, we try to account for even the weirdest episodes and the most ambiguous parts. Are we ultimately able to deal with infinite deferral? The novel suggests no. The narrator likens our efforts to counter the void of infinite deferral and radical undecidability to drawing labyrinths: “We are obsessed with building labyrinths, where before there was open plain and sky. To draw ever more complex patterns on the blank sheet. We cannot abide by that openness: it is terror to us” (Pynchon, *GR* 268). Rather than for chaos or deferral, the labyrinth here stands for a rigorous order.\(^{39}\) Similarly, Geli Tripping, the German girl Slothrop meets in Nordhausen, acknowledges the need to impose order onto the chaotic Zone (and by analogy our impulse to structure *Gravity’s Rainbow*: “It’s so unorganized out here. There have to be arrangements” (Pynchon, *GR* 295). Iser concedes that this unity may be an illusion—he argues after all that “the potential text is infinitely richer than any of its individual realizations” (Implied 280). He also notes, however, that we need this illusion of consistency: “through the illusions, the experience offered by the text becomes accessible to us, for it is only the illusion, on its different levels of consistency, that makes the experience ‘readable.’ If we cannot find (or impose) this consistency, sooner or later we will put the text down” (Implied 285). If the basic conviction of readability sets the reader-response critics apart from the doubtful reader, the attempt to impose order seems

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38 Jonathan Culler speaks of a “demand for sense” (123). Note also, that Barthes speaks of unity: “a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination” (“Death” 148). Is not even a deconstructive reading, while it denies the reader’s ability to gain mastery over a text, a paradox attempt at such mastery?

39 We could, of course, also apply to notion of the labyrinth to the textual shape of *Gravity’s Rainbow* itself. This Borgesian notion of the text as a labyrinth has been picked up by many critics (see for example David Seed’s *The Fictional Labyrinths of Thomas Pynchon*) and shall remain a footnote here.
like a relic from the paranoid reader. Iser’s recognition that a given text is richer than our personal readings of it constitutes a clear move beyond the paranoid reader.

This is also reflected in *Gravity’s Rainbow* in that it forces us to acknowledge that whatever pattern we impose in our reading there are countless other possible ways. What the Kenosha Kid sentence indicates on a small scale, applies to *Gravity’s Rainbow* as a whole and to the reader-response critics’ concept of reading in general: there are many ways to deal with the raw material of the text. There are several instances when this is explicitly stated in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. During a discussion of Gnostics, Kabbalists, and Manichaeans towards the end of the novel, for example, the narrator remarks that “[e]ach will have his personal Rocket” (Pynchon, *GR* 741). While this, again, is certainly confirmed by each piece of Pynchon criticism, it can also be read as a warning for the paranoid reader. There will not be a stable message at the end. There are other such *caveats* for the paranoid reader. The message of Rathenau’s ghost, for example, constitutes another warning: “You are off on a winding and difficult road … Is it any use for me to tell you that all you believe real is an illusion? I don’t know whether you’ll listen or ignore it. You only want to know about your path, your Autobahn” (Pynchon, *GR* 168). What *Gravity’s Rainbow* forces us to give up as an illusion is the belief in finding one objective and stable meaning. Apart from a warning for the paranoid reader, the notion of the “personal Rocket” also constitutes an acknowledgement of interpretive communities. The intertextual references to Kabbalist mysticism, astrology, Tarot, Gnosticism, or even Derrida or Kristeva, show that *Gravity’s Rainbow* not only thematizes interpretation but also guides its own interpretation by providing readers with various approaches and interpretive tools. By following these threads, we are participating, once again, in an activity that is both reflected and anticipated

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40 Interestingly, the same page mentions “a Victorian kind of Brain War, as between quaternions and vector analysis in the 1880s” (741). Since this is a central element in *Against the Day*, we are once again confronted with our tendency to find patterns, consistency, and unity.
by the text. We then not only confirm to some degree Iser and Jauss’s conviction of guiding devices but are also made aware that in *Gravity’s Rainbow* these devices point not to one but to many ways of reading the novel. The coexistence of many interpretive communities is for example illustrated in the “Slothrop Group” at the secret service branch known as PISCES (“Psychological Intelligence Schemes for Expediting Surrender”): confronted with Slothrop, statistician Roger Mexico, Freudian Edwin Treacle, Pavlovian physiologist Pointsman and others all “thought they’d discovered different things” (Pynchon, *GR* 86). If we consider Slothrop as a Leerstelle in Iser’s sense, as an “element… of indeterminacy” (Iser, *Implied* 283) and Mexico, Treacle, and Pointsman as readers, they illustrate Iser’s notion that the Leerstellen will be filled differently by different readers.41 The acknowledgement of both a text’s inexhaustibility and of the coexistence of various interpretive communities reiterates a fundamental premise of the Zone and, by analogy, of *Gravity’s Rainbow* as well as of reading in poststructuralist times: “the Zone can sustain many plots” (Pynchon, *GR* 614).

k. “You are free. You are free…”

Both form and content of *Gravity’s Rainbow* confront readers with the feeling of “unreadability” and force us to give up the attempt to find one stable meaning. We are left with the question of what Slothrop’s fate means for us. His development throughout the novel towards turning anti-paranoid, shows, as I have argued, his move beyond the paranoid reader—a move

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41 It is interesting to note that both Iser and Jauss use their concepts of Leerstellen or Erwartungshorizont as the basis for a value judgment. The gaps are an important part (or non-part) of a given text and, as Iser puts it, “no author worth his salt will ever attempt to set the whole picture before his reader’s eyes” (Implied 282). Texts that do not require the reader’s active participation or “texts which offer nothing but a harmonious world, purified of all contradiction and deliberately excluding anything that might disturb the illusion once established” (284) are clearly of less literary value to Iser. Similarly, Jauss uses the notion of the horizon of expectations as a tool to determine a work’s artistic merit: “The way in which a literary work satisfies, surpasses, disappoints, or disproves the expectations of its first readers in the historical moment of its appearance obviously gives a criterion for the determination of its aesthetic value” (“Literary History” 14).
that is clearly expressed, for example, in his observation, “Nobody ever said a day has to be juggled into any kind of sense at day’s end” (Pynchon, *GR* 207). What Slothrop is left with, however, is the nightmarish side of the Zone. His attempts to leave the Zone (Pynchon, *GR* 366, 387, 535) show that he, too, cannot deal with the openness, that anti-paranoia, and with it the notion of de-centering, is, in the long run, “a condition not many of us can bear for long” (Pynchon, *GR* 441). The failure of his attempts to leave makes him fall victim to the Zone—and, by analogy, victim to the reading practices of the Seventies. The revolution eats its children: Slothrop’s inability to move beyond the Zone, beyond the doubtful reader, lets him scatter and become de-centered.

If *Gravity’s Rainbow* shows not only a move beyond the paranoid reader, challenges the notions of consistency and guiding devices held by reader-response critics, but also exposes the nightmarish side of deconstruction and negative hermeneutics, what then are we left with? Is it Fish’s notion of interpretive communities which considers the novel as a blank slate upon which certain groups of readers impose certain readings?42 Or is it Barthes’s admonition early on in *S/Z* that “[t]o interpret a text is not to give it a (more or less justified, more or less free) meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what plural constitutes it” (5)? Both approaches consider the novel as what I would call a “Rorschach Text.” This metaphor both acknowledges the “Death of the Author” and underscores the importance of the reader in the production of meaning. As readers, we always impose order on the “ink blot.” This order, however, is purely personal; there is certainly no stable or definite message at the bottom, and our responses are inexhaustible. It is our very response, furthermore, that constitutes, Fish has argued (3), the meaning of a given text.

42 The project of the reader-response critics can perhaps be found in Pirate Prentice’s concept of “creative paranoia”: Of course a well-developed They-system is necessary—but it’s only half the story. For every They there ought to be a We. … Creative paranoia means developing at least as through a We-system as a They-system” (Pynchon, *GR* 650).
The Rorschach metaphor thus combines central assumptions of the doubtful and the hopeful readers of the decade: it illustrates not only that the quest for a stable meaning is pointless and that we do ourselves a favor by giving up this goal43 but also that there is no meaning without the reader. Considering that, as I have shown, the novel is continually speaking to us, we may read in several scenes a reinforcement of the empowerment of the reader. Replacing the personal pronouns in the following sentence with “us,” for example, provides us with good instruction manual for “manhandling” Gravity’s Rainbow in Barthes’s sense: our reading of the novel, as Slothrop’s progress through “the network of plots” of the Zone, “may yet carry [us] to freedom.”

We have to understand “that [we] should not be so paranoid … but ride instead their kind underground for a while, see where it takes [us]” (Pynchon, GR 614). We may therefore also hear in Enzian’s reminder to Slothrop and Katje toward the end of the novel a cry for our own liberation: “You are free. You are free…” (Pynchon, GR 674).

In view of Gravity’s Rainbow’s form and content, the notion of the Rorschach Text, which unifies suppositions of both doubtful readers and reader-response critics, is certainly validated. Before we throw our hands in the air and start celebrating the freedom of the reader and the death of the author, however, we need to realize that Pynchon is one step ahead of us. Let us take another Renfrewian step back from the map and consider what I have just outlined: Gravity’s Rainbow reflects contemporary reading practices, anticipates its readers’ reaction, and interpellates readers to join in certain reading practices that are itself inscribed in the novel. A basic presumption needs to be reiterated here: the notion of the interpellative function of Pynchon’s novel implies, of course, that there are elements in the novel that guide our reading. Pynchon’s use of textual and formal examples and his playing with novelistic conventions not

43 If the impetus to uncover a stable message constitutes a “paranoid situation,” Gravity’s Rainbow finds some very clear words for paranoid readers: “Paranoid are not paranoids … because they’re paranoid, but because they keep putting themselves, fucking idiots, deliberately into paranoid situations” (297).
only provides a “map” of contemporary reading but also disrupts these reading concerns. While Pynchon’s reclusiveness may be a literal embodiment of the death of the author, it should become clear, then, that the meta-critical awareness exhibited in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, which both comments on the reading zeitgeist and makes us characters in the novel, shows an author that may be more in charge than poststructuralists or reader-response critics would like to admit. In combination with the above described nightmarish side of the Zone, an awareness of the interpellative function thus helps us to see that *Gravity’s Rainbow* not only illustrates the move beyond the paranoid reader (and thus celebrates a kind of anarchic freedom in interpretation) but also calls into question central claims of doubtful readers and reader-response critics.

1. Re-centering

If Slothrop expressed the uncertainties of the times and the deferral of meaning so central to contemporary critical theory, the societal and cultural developments during the late 1970s showed that large parts of the public went back to “the Puritan reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible” (Pynchon, *GR* 190). While the academy was preoccupied with de-centering, many Americans were engaged in the activity of “re-centering.” The rise of Evangelism (or Televangelism) with its literal reading of the bible, which provided its followers with “a rock bed of certainty and solidity” (Sagert 52), shows the growing influence in society of forces diametrically opposed to notions of de-centering and freedom of the reader. This new

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44 See for example the first chapter in Tony Tanner’s book on Pynchon, in which he uses Barthes’s essay as a starting point for a quick biographical sketch (11-19).
45 In his article about the Me Decade, Wolfe therefore put forth the hypothesis that the events of the second half of the decade will come to be known as the “Third Great Awakening” (the first two took place in the 1740s and between 1825 and 1850). Making a link between religious ecstasy and the euphoria induced “through LSD and other psychedelics, orgy, dancing” (163), Wolfe argues that for many hippies or members of the Sixties counterculture it was not such a far step to the religious or spiritual Me-movements. Not unlike Marwick or Howe’s arguments about the self-centeredness of the counterculture or the New Left, Wolfe notes, “It is entirely possible that in the long run
spirituality and religiousness heralded the growing New Right that expressed itself in anti-feminism, anti-gay movements (such as Anita Bryant’s crusade to “Save Our Children”), Howard Jarvis’s campaign against taxes, or Jerry Falwell’s “Moral Majority.” What Hoeveler calls the “impressive intellectual renaissance of conservatism” (136) provides the basis for the reading developments described in the next chapter.

historians will regard the entire New Left experience as not so much a political as a religious episode wrapped in semi-military gear and guerilla talk” (149).

46 Farber calls these movements of the political right the “polyester faction of Richard Nixon’s proverbial ‘silent majority’” (20-21).
CHAPTER 5
1980-1991: RESISTING READERS. POLITICIZATION AND DEFENSIVE MOVES

a. Introduction

The culmination of the resurgent conservatism in the latter half of the Seventies was the election of Ronald Reagan on November 4, 1980. While Reagan and Reaganomics mark the most apparent break from the preceding decade, there were other events in 1980 and 1981 which heralded significant changes of the years ahead. Roland Barthes’s death after having been hit by a laundry van in Paris in May 1980, along with Jacques Lacan’s demise in 1981, anticipated the decline of French theory during the decade;¹ the publication of Annette Kolodny’s article “Dancing through the Minefield” in the Spring 1980 issue of Feminist Studies offered an early foretaste of the pluralism in methodology which became prominent in the emerging field of cultural studies;² and the launch of MTV in August 1981, which seemed to be the embodiment of parents’ and cultural critics’ fears about the attention deficit inducing nature of television, foreshadowed the sometimes dizzying changes in technology and entertainment. As in everyday

¹ The final nail in the coffin of deconstruction was perhaps the 1987 revelation of Paul de Man’s anti-semitic articles in a Belgian newspaper during World War II.
² Cultural studies is admittedly a very vague term. Eagleton differentiates between cultural theory (which includes Lacan, Derrida, Barthes, Kristeva, and Said) and more recent cultural studies (“In the old days, rock music was a distraction from your studies; now it may well be what you are studying,” After Theory 3), Rapaport conflates cultural studies and social studies (101), and Littau uses the term “difference criticism” as an “umbrella term for feminist, race, postcolonial, queer theories” (165). It may be part of cultural studies that it defies a clear definition or categorization. This vagueness has certainly contributed to the felt “theory mess.” It may be easier to consider the moniker cultural studies as a program or critical stance rather than a distinct movement. For a good introduction to that program, see Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson, and Jane Shattuc’s “The Culture That Sticks to Your Skin. A Manifesto for a New Cultural Studies” or David R. Shumway’s “The Sixties, the New Left, and the Emergence of Cultural Studies in the United States.”
America multiculturalism and plurality became increasingly visible, feminist theory, postcolonial studies, or ethnic studies were institutionalized at the academy. New theorists of multiculturalism and marginality brought with them an interest in actual or empirical readers, the Culture Wars between neoconservatives and liberals made reading a political issue, and the expansion and ever-present force of television revived debates about mass culture and the negative effects of the mass media. Despite the increasing plurality, a quality common to many theories of reading is, I argue, a defensive or resisting stance: reading becomes and act posited against the text, as in Judith Fetterley’s or Kay Boardman’s case, or against the general political and cultural climate.

Pynchon’s *Vineland*, published in 1990 but set in 1984, shows a society deeply permeated by pop culture and television: TV addicts have to go into rehab and large parts of society have turned into mindless consumers. Moreover, the form of the novel itself is reminiscent of TV’s editing style. *Vineland*’s account of the failed youth revolution of the Sixites and of Reaganite state repression, in which the paranoid fears of earlier Pynchon characters have become reality, is not only a portrayal of the 1980s Culture Wars but also shows Pynchon as an active participant. If Nixon was (thinly) disguised as Richard M. Zhlubb in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, both Nixon and Reagan are explicitly named—and blamed—in *Vineland*. While several commentators have considered *Vineland* a disappointing follow-up to *Gravity’s Rainbow* in terms of style, scope, and content, I suggest that *Vineland*’s form and subject matter differ from its predecessor because it reflects an entirely different set of reading anxieties. *Vineland* not only mirrors the pragmatization of critical theory but also, and this has been mostly overlooked by critics, lures its readers into premature comments about its style and content. We need to understand that in Pynchon’s continued preoccupation with reading practices lies a key to *Vineland*’s deceiving simplicity.
b. Reagan, Globalization, Multiculturalism, and Technology in the Culture Wars

If Reagan’s election as president made manifest the renaissance of conservatism that had been brewing since the mid-Seventies, America’s right turn—as William C. Berman calls it—was cemented into place in 1984 by Reagan’s landslide reelection. After the turmoil of the Sixties and the insecurities of the Seventies, Reagan’s paternal image, his anti-Soviet rhetoric, and a booming economy gave many a sense of stability and security. Accordingly, David Farber argues that Reagan picked up “the fallen torch of leadership” (25). Embodying the kind of leader that many Americans had hoped for, Reagan’s presidency rang in what Farber calls “a new age of belief—in capitalism, even in the righteous power of greed and selfishness, in God’s merciful power to help those who help themselves” (26). That not all was well, however, was not only shown by the enormous federal deficit with which Reagan left office but also in the low turnout at the 1980 and ’84 elections: William Chafe and Harvard Sitkoff point out that less than 30% of all Americans eligible to vote had actually voted for Reagan and more than half of the electorate had not voted at all (364). The sense of alienation which large segments of America had felt during the Seventies apparently had not just been wiped away. The dominant new conservatism, Reaganomics, and Reagan’s confidence only thinly veiled a society divided. This division was vividly expressed in the Culture Wars of the decade. While Reagan generally “dodged most of the cultural firework,” as Gil Troy notes (267), in matters of education he nonetheless took a

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3 Berman notes, “Though conservatives correctly argued that many Americans were better off as a result of Reagan’s policies, Reaganomics had also produced mountains of debt and the likely prospect of much lower living standards for the middle class and the working poor” (189).

4 A good account is James Davison Hunter’s *Culture Wars. The Struggle to Define America*. He argues that the debates over abortion, gay rights, women’s rights, child-care policy, multiculturalism, and education are ultimately struggles “over national identity—over the meaning of America” (50). While there were indeed widely diverging opinions, Hunter argues that “most Americans occupy a vast middle ground between the polarizing impulses of American culture” (43). See also Gil Troy’s *Morning in America*: “While from one perspective Reagan’s America was remarkably, depressingly, conformist, with everyone rushing to get home, kick off their Nikes, and watch Cosby, from another perspective Reagan’s America was remarkably, depressingly, divided, with the loud extremes at opposing sides of the spectrum creating mutually reinforcing but mutually exclusive social, cultural, political, and ideological identities” (285).
position typical for the conservative attack on liberal education. In a letter to Walter Annenberg, Reagan voiced his concern “that today’s faculty were the student demonstrators of the 60’s.” In the same letter, Reagan also expressed his fear “that our young people are getting a lot of indoctrination along with their teaching” (qtd. in Troy 271). At the end of the decade, Roger Kimball reiterated this fear in his book *Tenured Radicals*: “It has often been observed that yesterday’s student radical is today’s tenured professor or academic dean. … if the undergraduate population has moved quietly to the Right in recent years, the men and women who are paid to introduce students to the great works and ideas of our civilization have by and large remained true to the emancipationist ideology of the sixties” (xiv). Reagan and other conservatives thus continued what Daniel Bell and Kevin Phillips had started in the Seventies. The tendency to blame liberal education, multiculturalism, and the legacy of 1960s activism and radicalism for a perceived decline in national culture, however, was more visible and urgent in the Eighties. Conservative Culture War “classics,” such as William J. Bennett’s *To Reclaim a Legacy. A Report on the Humanities in Higher Education* (1984), Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), or Roger Kimball’s just mentioned *Tenured Radicals. How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (1990) essentially all took the same line. If the legacy of the Sixties and “tenured radicals” had ruined education and if students had “lost the practice of and taste for reading,” as Bloom argued (62), then, so he and others believed, it was up to a new conservatism to restore education and with it a taste for reading.

Another development that was widely debated during the Culture Wars was globalization. Along with the economic expansion and the Wall Street boom during Reagan’s presidency came the notion that the world was getting increasingly “flatter.” When McDonald’s opened a restaurant in Moscow in January 1990 and another one in Beijing in April 1992, it was
not only a visible expression of the reality of globalization but also an illustration of why globalization has often been equated with Americanization, cultural imperialism, or McDonaldization.\(^5\) Roland Robertson points out that the term *globalization* is more or less a product of the 1980s. Even in academia, he contends, it was not used until the early years of the decade. However, Robertson notes that “[d]uring the second half of the 1980s its use increased enormously, so much so that it is virtually impossible to trace the patterns of its contemporary diffusion across a large number of areas of contemporary life in different parts of the world” (8).

Similarly, John Tomlinson warns us that “we are pretty much bound to lose some of the complexity of globalization in any feasible account of it” (17). Tomlinson describes globalization as a “rapidly developing and ever-densening network of interconnections and interdependences” (2). A key element of globalization is thus what Tomlinson calls “complex connectivity” (2), which, as he argues, “weakens the ties of culture to place” (29). In terms of local “life-narratives” and “meaning construction,” Tomlinson asserts, globalization thus leads to “deterriorialization” (20-21, 29). Graham Thompson expands this point, noting that there was a dramatic shift in the 1980s, “as the availability of cultural brands, products and technologies evened out distinctions in cultural activity such that culture was no longer ‘rooted’ in its local context but ‘routed’ into a global cultural matrix” (169). A good example for this point is Bill Readings’s argument in *The University in Ruins*. Globalization and Americanization for him mean a “generalized imposition of the rule of the cash-nexus in place of the notion of national...

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\(^5\) Graham Thompson points out that, while it is true that Hollywood movies, Microsoft, McDonald’s, Disney, and Coca Cola have become available virtually anywhere, it would be false “to mistake multinational capitalism for US multinational capitalism” (157). With companies such as Sony (which took over CBS Records in 1988 and the Columbia TriStar Motion Picture Group in 1989), Toyota, or Nintendo, there was “a fear over the penetration of US markets by non-US multinationals and non-US brands” (157). Thompson therefore challenges the tendency to equate globalization or global capitalism with Americanization: “Despite concerns about the reach of American capitalism and the ‘McDonaldization’ or ‘Disneyization’ of non-US cultures, US cultural imperialism remains a dystopic fear rather than an actuality” (158). For more on the topic, see also George Ritzer’s *The McDonaldization of Society*. 


identity as determinant of all aspects of investment in social life” (3). Readings argues that in the wake of globalization and commercialization the university does not function as a formative factor for a national culture any longer. This has not only led to the bureaucratization of the university but also to deep changes in the university’s function: “the link between the University and the nation-state no longer holds in an era of globalization. The University thus shifts from being an ideological apparatus of the nation state to being a relatively independent bureaucratic system” (Readings 14). Although Readings never uses Tomlinson’s term, what he describes is the “deterritorialization” of the university. His book thus illustrates how a (admittedly somewhat undifferentiated) notion of globalization figured as a looming threat in discussions about education and the place of the study of literature.

For the U.S., globalization has also meant that its culture is being shaped by outside influences, as Thompson points out (158, 170). In American Culture in the 1980s, he uses food and music as examples to show that the U.S. functions not only as globalizer and influencer but is itself affected by globalization.6 Thompson’s text illustrates that accounts of globalization during the Eighties often directly led to a discussion of multiculturalism. The same is the case, for example, in Vincent Leitch’s Living with Theory, in which he clearly reiterates Tomlinson’s notion of deterritorialization. “Globalization today,” writes Leitch, “has also meant the devolution of national literatures toward loose assemblages composed of different regions, languages, and ethnic and minority groups” (141).7 Of course, the U.S. had always been a multicultural nation, but the 1980s saw several developments which had a significant impact on American culture. Not only did diversity (and this includes sexual preferences, religion, and

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6 That Thompson makes British music and the “New American Cuisine” of the 1980s his main examples (162-70) neatly illustrates contemporary trends in cultural studies to open up the range of subjects considered worth studying.
7 A clear expression of this development is Marc Shell and Werner Sollors’s Multilingual Anthology of American Literature (2000), which includes, among many others, texts in Chinese, Norwegian, Yiddish, or Navajo.
ethnicity) become more visible, immigration patterns also changed during the decade: between 1980 and 1990 the number of Mexican-born people in the U.S. doubled, and immigration from Cuba, Korea, China, India, and the Philippines increased, while immigration from Canada, Italy, and the UK decreased (Thompson 174)—which is to say that during the 1980s the dominant WASP culture found itself increasingly challenged by other influences. The impact of these developments on education is perhaps best illustrated in a core dispute of the Culture Wars: the Stanford curriculum debate of 1988. The argument over the inclusion of ethnic literatures and non-traditional canons divided academia and proved that the cultural changes in the nation had left its mark at the universities. Some of the above mentioned conservative Culture War classics, while generally blaming liberal curricula for the perceived decline in education, also showed resentment towards the inclusion of multiculturalism. Allan Bloom, for example, argued that multicultural universities focused too much on the “spirit of the times” rather than on “permanent concerns of mankind” (19) and Dinesh D’Souza, in Illiberal Education, argued that multiculturalism and political correctness undermined the project of liberal education to teach universal values. The critique of multiculturalism and liberal education was often accompanied by an attack on critical (especially French) theory. That there was a hint of xenophobia in these attacks, as Loren Glass notes in his article “The End of Culture” (Glass 196), may or may not be the case, but there is no question that certain anti-intellectual tendencies reemerged in the debates. Gil Troy’s account of the “Battle of Stanford” is a case in point. Claiming not to take sides in the curriculum debate, his text nonetheless betrays a stance that is typical for the opponents of theory. While not necessarily critical of multiculturalism per se, he remains very critical of multiculturalist “Balkanizers” in literary theory: “These intellectual Balkanizers

8 Colin Davis, in After Poststructuralism, makes the same point: “the hysterical or anxious denunciations of French thought are [often] based on little or no knowledge of primary texts, and they dumbly replicate more or less gross misreadings seasoned with a hint of xenophobia” (1).
developed an obtuse, jargon-filled speech rejecting traditional ideas yet often uncritical about their own sacred cows and buzzwords: colonialism, Eurocentrism, phallocentrism, logophalallocentrism” (Troy 270). Troy’s text, along with others, such as D’Souza’s *Illiberal Education*, Harold Bloom’s *The Western Canon*, or John M. Ellis’s *Literature Lost. Social Agendas and the Corruption of the Humanities*, show not only that the debate about multiculturalism carried on into the 1990s and the 2000s but also illustrates a recurring theme: the suspicion that some texts were included in the curriculum not for their literary merit or aesthetic value but rather for political reasons.

Apart from the rise of neoconservatism, the impact of globalization, and growing multiculturalism, one of the most notable developments of American society during the Eighties was its technologization. A list of innovations during the first half of the Eighties makes clear what enormous changes in technology and entertainment the decade brought about: Apple introduced the Apple III in May 1980, CNN debuted in June 1980, IBM brought its first personal computer on the market in August 1981, and Sony released its portable Walkman in the same year. In 1982, Sony and Philips introduced the CD and Microsoft released MS-DOS for IBM PCs. The number of cable networks skyrocketed, the VCR changed viewing habits and leisure time, computer game technology was on the rise (*Pac-Man* was released in 1980), and the PC became *Time* magazine’s Man of the Year in 1983. The first “test tube babies” signaled breakthroughs in biotechnology and genetics — a development which was met with mixed feelings and created new concerns in the public. Dystopian visions in movies like Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982) or novels like William Gibson’s * Neuromancer* (1984) reflected

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9 Between 1980 and 1998, the number rose from 28 to 174 (Wong 108).
10 Another anxiety of great importance had to do with AIDS, which started to enter the public’s consciousness in the early years of the decade. How little was known about the virus at that time is exemplified by a July 1981 story in the *New York Times*, which described it as a “gay cancer” (qtd. in Batchelor and Stoddart 21).
anxieties about the dark sides of technology. The disasters of the Space Shuttle *Challenger* and Chernobyl in 1986 proved that technology did have its dangerous side but did little to dampen the technocult of the decade. Thompson sums it up nicely when he notes, “What the man in the grey flannel suit was to the 1950s, so the cyborg was to the 1980s” (43). Not surprisingly, technologization also became a subject in the Culture Wars—especially television was of great concern to conservatives and liberals alike. Kate Moody’s *Growing Up on Television*, published a year before the launching of MTV, was a clairvoyant description of the editing style of MTV: “Television’s most successful techniques—short segments, fast action, quick cuts, fades, dissolves—break time into perceptual bits. … The pace and speed of television cause children to be easily distracted; they are inundated with too many messages and cannot stop to make sense of this confusion” (qtd. in Lazere 288). The underlying fear, shared by many liberals, was that television would turn viewers into unthinking and gullible couch potatoes who are easy to indoctrinate and too slow minded to imagine anything other than the status quo. In the conservative camp, television was often seen as the degenerate offspring of liberal politics. The general cultural decline was blamed on a vague notion of Sixties radical politics and its degrading influence on the nation. Bloom’s *Closing of the American Mind* provides a good example for a conservative take on MTV:

Picture a thirteen-year-old boy … wearing his Walkman headphones or watching MTV. He enjoys the liberties hard won over centuries by the alliance of

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11 Pynchon’s “Nearer, My Couch, to Thee,” his article on sloth in the *New York Times Book Review*, neatly satirizes this image:

Any discussion of Sloth in the present day is of course incomplete without considering television, with its gifts of paralysis, along with its creature and symbiont, the notorious Couch Potato. Tales spun in idleness find us Tubeside, supine, chiropractic fodder, sucking it all in, re-enacting in reverse the transaction between dream and revenue that brought these colored shadows here to begin with so that we might feed, uncritically, committing the six other deadly sins in parallel, eating too much, envying the celebrated, coveting merchandise, lusting after images, angry at the news, perversely proud of whatever distance we may enjoy between our couches and what appears on the screen. (57)
philosophic genius and political heroism, consecrated by the blood of martyrs; he is provided with comfort and leisure by the most productive economy ever known to mankind; … And in what does progress culminate? A pubescent child whose body throbs with orgasmic rhythms; whose feelings are made articulate in hymns to the joys of onanism or the killing of parents; whose ambition is to win fame and wealth in imitating the drag-queen who makes the music. In short, life is made into a non-stop, commercially prepackaged masturbational fantasy. (74-75)

A fear common to critics of all ends of the political spectrum was that readers were increasingly transforming into viewers. Interestingly, this exact trend can be observed in cultural studies during the decade. John Fiske and John Hartley’s Reading Television (1978), for example, illustrates the growing importance of TV in the academic debate. Their title also suggests that television can be read and that television is something that can be studied at the academy by applying the same theory to it that others have applied to literature.

c. Reading in the Academy: Empiricism and Pluralism

This is exactly what Robert C. Allen does in his article “Reader-Oriented Criticism and Television.” Instead of considering it a looming threat, he treats television as an object for study. Using reader-oriented criticism, especially Iser and Fish, he analyses soap-operas, made-for-TV movies, and talk shows. That “reading” comes increasingly to designate other activities than just reading can be also seen in the introduction to Sara Mills’s collection Gendering the Reader, in which she conflates reading, viewing, and listening (1). These two examples delineate important developments of audience-oriented criticism during the decade: in the wake of cultural studies, texts other than literature were “read” and, as the essays in Mills’s book illustrate, cultural or
social context and actual readers increasingly became the focus of critical interest. Reading and “the reader” thus remained an important topic in the academy, but reception theory and reader-response criticism lost their status as separate disciplines. After several important reader-oriented anthologies in the early years of the Eighties, reader-oriented criticism became assimilated into Feminism, New Historicism, Postcolonial Theory, or Ethnic Studies. Under the influence of the emphasis on specific historic contexts common to these approaches, the rather universal and theoretical notions of the reader of Iser & Co were thus supplanted by an interest in contextualized and “empirical” readers. The fate of reader-response criticism is representative of developments of critical theory in general. Apart from a turn towards sociological methods and pragmatism, literary theory of the decade was also characterized by a turn away from a fixed approach towards pluralism in methodology. On the one hand, these developments reflect the fact that there was no “next big thing” from Europe. Instead of a dominant paradigm, we have the coexistence of a multiplicity of theories and approaches. On the other hand, the new pragmatism and interest in the particular were, I suggest, part of the concurrent Culture Wars.

Good examples for the empirical observation of actual readers are Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocinio Schweickart’s 1986 collection Gender and Reading. Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts and their 2004 follow-up Reading Sites. Social Difference and Reader Response, which show how audience-oriented criticism was absorbed into Feminism and New Historicism. Much more than Iser and Jauss, they acknowledge that various “interacting social categories” (Reading Sites vii) have an influence on reading behavior. The influence of Michel Foucault and New

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12 There was an interesting defensive move in the academy against all this. While literature departments were increasingly “reading culture,” there was a conservative counter-movement emphasizing the importance of canonical literature, or of reading literature in general. In many cases, it was the Creative Writing departments which carried this torch.

Historicism is especially clear in Flynn and Schweickart’s understanding of history “as a constructed representation of events rather than as an exact account of them” (Reading Sites 10). Their two books are good representations of the development of reader-response criticism from the 1980s onwards: critics became interested in actual readers rather than in universalized readers, which led to empirical “examination[s] of how the activity of the reader is implicated in the prevailing social and cultural differences” (Schweickart and Flynn, Reading Sites 10). Karin Littau, in Theories of Reading, thus draws a clear line between conceptions of the reader in the 1970s and the 1980s. Even though she only focuses on feminist criticism and ignores the impact of New Historicism, she nonetheless rightly portrays the developments of the Eighties: “Whereas reader-oriented criticism of the 1970s had assumed a universalized reader, which made them blind to identity markers such as gender, feminist theories of reading have sought to address the specifics of sexual and social difference” (127). The specificity and historical or social situatedness of readers were thus increasingly taken into consideration in reader-oriented studies of the Eighties whether feminist or non-feminist in orientation.

Littau’s insistence that “we cannot impose a single identity on the reader” (123) has several consequences. First of all, it undermines the theoretical reader of Iser and Jauss along with universal notions of an “ideal reader,” and second, it means that the multiple identities of readers and differences between readers (women may read differently from men, middle class women differently from lower class women, and so on) have to be empirically and carefully researched. The move from the reader as a textual construct—pointed out by both Littau (122) and Allen (87)—to a preoccupation with actual readers brings with it a pragmatic approach and employment of social studies methodologies, which is quite representative for a general turn in
literary theory towards cultural studies at the time.¹⁴ The popularity of more culturally or historically oriented approaches can be seen in the flood of empirical studies which contextualized the reader and focused on actual audiences, “vernacular readers” (Leitch, *Living 33*), or the history of reading in general: Janice Radway’s *Reading Romance* (1984), Cathy N. Davidson’s *Reading in America* (1989), Nicholas Zill and Marianne Winglee’s *Who Reads Literature?* (1990), Bridget Fowler’s *The Alienated Reader* (1991), Henry Jenkins’s *Textual Poachers. Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (1992), Jacqueline Bobo’s *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (1995), Alberto Manguel’s *A History of Reading* (1996), Thomas McLaughlin’s *Street Smarts and Critical Theory. Listening to the Vernacular* (1996), or Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier’s *A History of Reading in the West* (1999). That these texts often examined reading in terms of social categories, identity politics, and gender differences not only reflects the diversification of American culture in the Eighties but also constitutes a participation in the Culture Wars.

Apart from empiricism, the other visible development in reading practices during the decade was a broadening spectrum of approaches in Feminism, New Historicism, and other critical schools, which was heralded in 1980 by Kolodny’s call for “a playful pluralism” (110-111). In a time when pluralism and the “theory mess” were not yet the issue they were to become, Kolodny’s “Dancing through the Minefield” was a programmatic and clairvoyant description of the shape of theory to come. At the time of its publication, her text constituted a defensive move (defending pluralism against those who attacked feminism for a “lack [of] both

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¹⁴ Defenders of the more textually oriented high theory of the Seventies, such as Herman Rapaport, have not been too happy about this development. In *The Theory Mess*, Rapaport expresses his surprise that “faculty in the languages and literatures put up little resistance to a completely contrary paradigm that insisted upon the primacy of the social acts themselves and the secondariness of the ways in which they were represented or mediated” (103). Rapaport is especially appalled how, after all the theory of the Seventies, a simplistic notion of self-fashioning and agency comes back: “after an intensive critical dismantling of the metaphysics of agency in the 1970s and ’80s, cultural studies had the audacity to ignore all these concerns for the sake of reinstating the autonomous individual of social studies from our high-school curriculum” (103).
definition and coherence,” 101), an opening up of theory, an embrace of the new, and a political move (in its inclusion of new canons, new objects of study, and multiplicity). In all this, Kolodny anticipated important critical developments of the years ahead.

Pluralism can be considered in two ways: it not only describes the state of theory with its proliferation of “studies” (queer, ethnic, postcolonial, gender, etc.) but also the variety of methodologies within each field. While Kolodny argued that no single method (close reading, Marxist analysis, deconstruction, etc.) would suffice for feminist analysis and that pluralism is the only way to “dance through the minefield,” New Historicism advocated a similar pluralist approach as can be seen in H. Aram Veeser’s introduction to his 1988 book The New Historicism: “the New Historicism has given scholars new opportunities to cross the boundaries separating history, anthropology, art, politics, literature, and economics … It brackets together literature, ethnography, anthropology, art history, and other disciplines and sciences, hard and soft” (xi). When Kolodny notes that “our purpose is not and should not be the formulation of any single reading method or potentially procrustean set of critical procedures” and that “[o]nly by employing a plurality of methods will we protect ourselves from the temptation of so oversimplifying any text” (110-11), she also anticipates core convictions of cultural studies. In their 2002 “Manifesto for a New Cultural Studies,” for example, Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson, and Jane Shattuc write: “the realization that the meaning of texts or practices exists

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15 Furthermore, it may be applied also to the literary scene, as Mark McGurl does in his article “The Program Era: Pluralisms of Postwar American Fiction.” The two dominant paradigms of the “program era,” argues McGurl are “technomodernism” and “high cultural pluralism.” McGurl describes the latter phenomenon as both “partially democratized modernism” and “elitist pluralism,” emerging in the overlapping of elitist high modernism and cultural pluralism in English Departments (118). See also McGurl’s recently published book The Program Era. Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing.
only in relation to complex social and cultural forces … supersedes an attachment to one rigid, global theory” (18).¹⁶

This pluralism has been a significant characteristic of theory in the late twentieth century and has led to important debates during the 1990s, as will be shown in the next chapter. At the same time, such pluralism makes it hard to describe one dominant reading paradigm. As the discussion has shown, there simply is no such dominant paradigm. There is, however, one stance common to several of the approaches of the decade: even though Eagleton speaks of the “depoliticized 80s and 90s” (After Theory 40), I would suggest that underneath the empiricism and pluralism of the Eighties was quite often a rather political defensive or resisting attitude, as the following examples will show.

d. Resisting Readers

In a decade when Reaganomics, the Wall Street boom, globalization, and neoconservatism were strong cultural developments, when there was a backlash against feminism, as Susan Faludi has argued, when shock jocks, such as Howard Stern, helped spawn what Gil Troy calls a male chauvinist “gutter politics” (280), and when literature was, as Tom Grimes notes, “politically, morally, and emotionally tentative” (402), reading often became an oppositional—and frequently political—activity. This is, for example, expressed in several of Jonathan Franzen essays. Deeply worried that “[f]or every reader who dies today, a viewer is born” (165), Franzen envisions reading as “a form of social opposition” and “a kind of cultural Je refuse!” (89-90). It is this posture that I describe with Judith Fetterley’s term “the resisting reader.” Moving beyond Fetterley’s use of the term, I use it to illustrate a paradigmatic

¹⁶ Kolodny or Jenkins, McPherson, and Shattuc differ from the doubtful readers in that they resist a “fixed method” (Feyerabend 199) not because of the notion of endless deferral of meaning or their resistance to meta-narratives but rather because of practical considerations.
oppositional stance that has to be understood in the context of the Culture Wars, neoconservatism, globalization, and technologization. The resisting reader of the 1980s assumes a defensive position against various forces: patriarchy, the ideal reader and universalized notions of the reader, television, dominant ideology, Western imperialism, anti-intellectualism, deterritorialization, and so on.

This resisting stance is especially clear in feminist criticism. Littau’s feminist approach to theories of reading and Fetterley’s landmark text *The Resisting Reader* shall serve as two quick examples for defensive maneuvers in feminist theory. In the last chapter of *Theories of Reading*, entitled “Sexual Politics of Reading,” Littau validates affective responses and thus argues for a kind of reading that has often been considered inferior or “feminine.” She essentially follows Hélène Cixous here. Cixous’s or Littau’s emphasis on the “physicality” of reading and their embracing of reading’s effects has political implications. Such readings go against paternalistic modes of reading, which are exemplified for Littau by Freud: “By aligning woman with ‘sensuality’ and man with ‘the higher intellectual processes’ … it is as if mankind has managed to climb up the evolutionary and social ladder, and what is left at the bottom is womankind” (145). There has therefore been, according to Littau, “a long history of hierarchization in Western thought whereby man is associated with the dominant and positive term, and woman with the subordinate and negative term: ‘mind over body, culture over nature, self over other, reason over passion’” (146). The reader is much more than just a sense maker, argues Littau. As such, feminist criticism acknowledges the body—or “brings the sexy back,” if you will. Littau’s point is therefore that “bodily responses to literature cannot be written off as unsophisticated” (156). With this, Littau claims that “the whole of literary history lends itself to be re-read, or reclaimed, on behalf of *materialism*” (157). Littau’s *materialist* reading, taking into account the
physicality and the effects of reading, emphasizes individual, “bodily” readers, stands in contrast to the dry perception of reading as merely an intellectual sense-making activity, and thus repudiates universalized notions of the reader and the “ideal reader.”

Fetterley, who describes her book *The Resisting Reader* as “a self-defense survival manual for the woman reader lost in ‘the masculine wilderness of the American novel’” (viii), starts off with the claim that “[l]iterature is political” (xi): while literature pretends to speak universal truths, Fetterley claims that in fact “only one reality is encouraged, legitimized, and transmitted” (xi). This reality is the male perspective. Since the reader inscribed in most canonical works is male, as Fetterley argues, the female reader is forced to identify as male: “women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose central principles is misogyny” (xx). If American literature defines something like an American identity, then the exclusion of female readers leads, Fetterley alleges, to “a peculiar form of powerlessness” (xiii). The feminist critic therefore has a clear political goal: to resist this system of values and to empower female readers. “Clearly, then,” Fetterley writes, “the first act of the feminist critic must be to become a resisting rather than an assenting reader and, by this refusal to assent, to begin the process of exorcising the male mind that has been implanted in us” (xxii). Her resisting reading disrupts this male perspective and imposes a new, liberating perspective on the text. Fetterley is a defensive reader writing against the suppression of the female perspective. In the end, this has implications which transcend the realm of literature. Fetterley imagines the goal of feminist reading as follows: “To create a new understanding of our literature is to make possible a new effect of that

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17 Any account of universal readers, notes Littau in Lacanian terms, is complicated by the fact that that it cannot “be assumed that the individual reader presents a unified self” (127). Mills similarly warns about generalizing the term “women” since it encompasses differences in race, age, class, sexual education, education, or occupation and therefore does not designate one unified phenomenon (1-2). The poststructuralist infinite deferral may thus also be applied to this discussion.
literature on us. And to make possible a new effect is in turn to provide the conditions for changing the culture that literature reflects” (xix-xx).

Another set of resisting readers can be subsumed under the header “resisting television.” As the examples of Bloom and Phillips (in the preceding chapter) have shown, discussions about television were an important battleground of the Culture Wars. Among theorists of reading, there is an interesting development: reading is often considered an oppositional activity that provides a counterweight against the force of the Tube. In *Sleepwalking Through History. America in the Reagan Years*, Haynes Johnson notes that “[i]n the eighties Ronald Reagan and television fitted into American society like a plug into a socket” (139). Johnson argues that Reagan and television, with their tendency towards simplicities and slogans, myths, happy endings, and fragmentary images, were made for each other. Reagan’s “soothing personality” somehow lulled viewers into a passive acceptance of the status quo, notes Johnson, and “increasing numbers of Americans became spectators instead of participants. Politically and personally they were ‘couch potatoes’” (141). A nation turning into unthinking and inert couch potatoes, in short, was a scenario which many intellectuals during the Eighties were afraid of.

Signs of the malaise were seen everywhere. In a *Washington Post* article in December 1986, Jonathan Yardley decried what he considered a fundamental change in the basic conditions of American society: “writing is no longer essential to the exchange of information” and “Americans are not regular readers” anymore (D2). He further observed that “[w]e don’t write letters anymore; we talk on the telephone. We do read newspapers and magazines—though

18 Kay Boardman expands Fetterley’s concept of the resisting reader and develops the “renegade reader”: “this reading position goes one step further conceptually than Fetterley’s resisting reader in its acknowledgment of the potency of hierarchy of discourse in the unified reading of the classic realist text … The renegade reader not only resists and reads against the grain, but actively constructs a number of alternative readings available from within the text” (208). In the end, Boardman’s renegade reader amounts to a deconstructive reading with a feminist agenda: “A renegade reading practice exposes the gaps in the text and attributes significant agency to the reader in the production of meaning and thus breaks through and shatters the spurious ‘truth’ of the classic realist text” (214).
circulation has failed to keep up with population growth—but our primary sources of information and entertainment are technological: television and radio, video and tape recorders, computers and sounds systems” (D2). Four years later, Nicholas Zill and Marianne Winglee published a report whose title asked a question that was on the minds of many concerned intellectuals: *Who Reads Literature? The Future of the United States as a Nation of Readers*. Their book assessed various surveys conducted during the first half of the 1980s.\(^\text{19}\) While these surveys showed that 56% of adults had read prose, poetry, or plays in the year prior to the survey, Zill and Winglee point out that the readership of “meritorious contemporary works” amounted to only 7 to 12% of the adult population (74). Apart from the low number of “quality readers,” one of the most disappointing findings of the survey for them was the fact that 44% of American adults “[did] not read literature at all” (75).\(^\text{20}\) Even though they acknowledge that “[o]nly a weak negative association was found in the SPPA data between television viewing and literature reading” (79), the fear that TV would turn people away from reading is ever present in their book. “[T]here is little doubt,” Zill and Winglee note, “that the advent of television has had profound effects on our cultural life” (79).\(^\text{21}\)

Armando Petrucci’s chapter on “Reading to Read: A Future for Reading” in Cavallo and Chartier’s *A History of Reading in the West*, is an interesting addition to Zill and Winglee’s anxious observations. What Petrucci’s text shows is an intellectual’s concern about undifferentiated mass reading and “deculturated readers” (362). His description of the “new mass readers” essentially repeats the 1950s debate about highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow culture

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\(^\text{19}\) The Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA) in 1982 and 1985, the Arts-Related Trend Study (ARTS) in 1983-84, and the Consumer Research Study on Reading and Book Purchasing in 1983.

\(^\text{20}\) This was also the topic of Nick Thimmesch’s collection *Aliteracy: People Who Can Read But Won’t* (1984).

\(^\text{21}\) The numbers are quite telling: in 1985, 25.6% of those surveyed claimed to be light viewers of television (less than 2 hours a day), 45.9% moderate viewers (2-3 hours), and 28.5% heavy viewers (4 or more hours a day) (Zill and Winglee 70).
but shows additional concerns about the growth of television. Reading, Petrucci notes, has ceased to be the main means of acculturation. “In mass culture,” he argues, “it has been undermined by television,” and reading practices have necessarily been influenced by these new modes of acquisition of knowledge (361). The habit of zapping, he suggests, has created “potential readers who not only know no ‘canon’ or ‘order of reading’, but have not acquired the respect, traditional in book readers, for the order of the text” (362). Petrucci’s argument is typical for a traditionalist or conservative concern about the influence of television. On the other end of the political spectrum, Donald Lazere’s “Literacy and Mass Media: The Political Implications,” published in Cathy N. Davidson’s 1989 collection Reading in America, is a good example for leftist concerns about the negative effects of mass media in general, and television in particular. Lazere’s point is that television, because of its low “literacy level” (289), because of the “absence of the analytic and synthetic modes of reasoning” (291) in its content, and because of its restricted linguistic code and its limiting impact on the audience’s imagination, not only dumbs down the audience but also has profound political implications in that it leads to a kind of inertia and unquestioning acceptance of the status quo. In arguing that this “media-induced illiteracy” (289) leads to predominantly conservative attitudes, Lazere counters arguments about a liberal bias in American media put forth by neoconservative critics such as Kevin Phillips. While he does not argue that higher education or improved cognitive abilities would automatically lead to liberal beliefs, Lazere feels that “higher education, elaborate language codes” (300) and complex cognitive patterns promoted by literature would be a remedy against the “impoverished, powerless mentality in millions of people” (299). Lazere sees his argument

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22 Lazere’s TV consumer has cognitive deficiencies and is lulled into unthinking conformity by a form of entertainment which “is at a literacy level not much higher than that of children’s programming.” In order to maximize its audience and thus its revenue, commercial media must be aimed, claims Lazere, at “the lowest common denominator of cognitive development” (289).
thus as “a powerful reaffirmation of the value of literary study at all levels of education for promoting cognitive development and critical thinking” (287). Television may turn the audience into passive, apolitical (or conservative) couch potatoes, but reading can save us. Lazere’s notion of the reader in opposition to the leveling forces of television thus illustrates an important political dimension.

The move towards pragmatism and empiricism, the adoption of a playful pluralism, notions of resisting or renegade readers, and concerns about deculturated readers and apolitical couch potatoes all share this political dimension and are specific responses to the cultural and political climate of the 1980s. The Culture Wars challenged intellectuals and academics not only to take position but also to adapt their methods to be more “provable,” empirical, and politically relevant. The emphasis on the Other and the marginal or the local and the particular—observable not only in studies of specific readers as the ones mentioned above but also in postcolonial and cultural studies—are also to be seen in the context of globalization, multiculturalism, and the Culture Wars. The developments in the academy are therefore, in borrowing a term from Judith Chambers’s book on Pynchon, responses to a “reconfigured world” (185). Vineland is, as Chambers rightly argues in her excellent chapter on Pynchon’s fourth novel, “radically different” from Gravity’s Rainbow because it “addresses [this] reconfiguration” (185). Chambers’s focus on the diminished postmodern world, in which “nearly everything seems irrefragably reduced to commodity and surface” (184), is, however, not the whole story. My analysis of Vineland through the lens of interpellation and reading concerns shows that there are more continuities with Pynchon’s previous work than many critics have thought. It was the seeming break with Pynchon’s previous work and Vineland’s infusion with references to pop culture and television that led many critics to negative estimations and disappointment.
e. *Vineland*

Good news first: Pynchon’s first novel after *Gravity’s Rainbow* was, as Douglas Keesey notes, “a phenomenal popular success” ("Vineland” 107) and stayed on the *New York Times* bestseller list for thirteen weeks. The story of aging hippie Zoyd Wheeler and his teenage daughter Prairie who are looking for Zoyd’s ex-wife (and Prairie’s mother) Frenesi, a former Sixties radical who turned against her friends and ran away with federal prosecutor and bad guy Brock Vond, seemed much “more manageable” than *Gravity’s Rainbow*, as one critic put it (qtd. in Keesey, “Vineland” 108). As the mainstream press struggled to come to terms with what Keesey describes as *Vineland*’s “radical politics” (“Vineland” 109), the academic community was preoccupied with accounting for *Vineland*’s difference from its predecessor. Many critics were simply disappointed: Frank Kermode called it “a disappointing book” (3), John Leonard suspected that it was “a breather between biggies” observing that it did not “feel like something obsessed-about and fine-tuned for the seventeen years since *Gravity’s Rainbow*” (281), and David Cowart felt that Pynchon had “made no effort to surpass *Gravity’s Rainbow*” ("Attenuated” 67). Leonard’s view that several characters in *Vineland* amounted to nothing more than excuses for Pynchon to talk about film, television, or music (283) was echoed by other critics who were put off by the novel’s permeation with pop culture (Joseph Slade and Cowart, for example). There were, however, also more positive reviews, for example by Salman Rushdie, who called *Vineland* “a major political novel about what America has been doing to itself, to its children, all these many years” (par. 13), or by Richard Powers, who considered the novel “a return … to a more traditional novel” and a “burlesque but deeply engaged fairy tale” (694, 697). Both Rushdie and Powers’s reviews indicated which direction *Vineland* criticism would take.

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23 Keesey argues that most mainstream critics fell into one of two categories in the face of the novel’s political content: either “the praise-and-ignore school” or “the identify-and-denounce school” (“Vineland” 111).
24 Kermode adds, however, that “this judgment may depend on a measure of miscomprehension” (3).
Recovering from the discovery that *Vineland* was not *Gravity’s Rainbow, Part Deux*, critics focused more closely on the novel’s politics (such as M. Keith Booker in “America and Its Discontents. The Failure of Leftist Politics in Pynchon’s *Vineland*”) or its shift in aesthetics (for example Marc Conner’s “Postmodern Exhaustion. Thomas Pynchon’s *Vineland* and the Aesthetic of the Beautiful”) and often came to consider *Vineland* as a companion text to *The Crying of Lot 49*. Thomas Schaub, for example, notes that the two “form a pair: [*The Crying of Lot 49*] shows the consciousness-raising of a housewife in the 1960s, while [*Vineland*] serves as a coda to the 1960s from the standpoint of Reagan’s America in the 1980s” (*Approaches* 3).

What is overlooked in most of these discussions of popular culture, politics, and stylistic changes in *Vineland* is Pynchon’s continued concern with shifts in the reading zeitgeist. Considering Daniel Punday’s assertion that “it should be no surprise that *Vineland* and *Mason & Dixon* have been largely read in the terms developed for interpreting *Gravity’s Rainbow*” (251), there is a certain irony in the fact that few critics have picked up on Pynchon’s sustained concern with creating reader-character parallels in *Vineland*.

If “the Zone” constituted Slothrop’s reading environment and illustrated critical concerns of the 1970s academy, *Vineland*’s depiction of 1980s America and the ubiquity of “the Tube” show a significantly different setting and illustrate the cultural, societal, and political changes described in the first half of this chapter. Behind the deceivingly simple story, Pynchon socks us with another of his allegories. If *Vineland* appears on the surface as a nostalgic elegy for the Sixties, a critique of contemporary culture and Reaganite America, or a story of regeneration and

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25 For similar evaluations of *Vineland*, see also Patricia A. Bergh’s “(De)constructing the Image” (1) or Michiko Kakutani’s review of *Inherent Vice*, “Another Doorway to the Paranoid Pynchon Dimension” (par. 5), among others.  
26 Towards the end of the novel, we read, “Sister Rochelle … now socked Takeshi with another of her allegories, this time about Hell” (Pynchon, *VL* 382).
renewal (depending on which critic we read), the novel presents us under the surface, I suggest, with a sophisticated allegory on the entrapments of superficial readings.

f. Vineland’s America

Initially, Vineland seems to cater to our Erwartungshorizont. The novel opens with Zoyd waking up from a dream just as Gravity’s Rainbow starts with Pirate Prentice’s vision. Zoyd’s dream of carrier pigeons whose message “he could never quite get to in time” (Pynchon, VL 3) recalls not only the mysterious carriers of the Tristero but also Stencil and Oedipa’s attempts to decipher a hidden message. A few paragraphs later, we read about “blue jays who came screaming down out of the redwoods” (4) echoing Gravity’s Rainbow’s famous opening sentence “A screaming comes across the sky.” On top of all that, we are informed that the events of the novel take place in 1984—a promising year for government-induced paranoia. No wonder, then, that some critics saw Vineland in the tradition of Pynchon’s first three novels. Paul Gray, for example, found in the novel “the absolutely typical Pynchon plot” (par. 5). We are given, however, an early warning that we have to be careful about appearances as Pynchon deliberately shatters our Erwartungshorizont. The fact that the blue jays do not quite pose the same threat as the V-2 tells the readers from the beginning, “This is not another Gravity’s Rainbow!” If the blue jays have not made this clear enough, the fact that the mandala, which has played a prominent symbolic role in Gravity’s Rainbow,27 becomes a pizza in Vineland signals an obvious move beyond Vineland’s predecessor. TV-addict Hector Zuñiga standing “beneath a stained-glass window made in the likeness of an eightfold Pizzic Mandala” (Pynchon, VL 51) is therefore an iconic image that illustrates that Vineland is meant to be different.

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27 See for example Weisenburger 9-11.
Accordingly, *Vineland*’s America is very different from the America of *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49*. This is America Incorporated, in which everything is super-sized and brand names (Count Chocula, Froot Loops, Nestle Quik, Turnbull & Asser) and popular culture (*Return of the Jedi*, *Zaxxon*, Mr. Spock, *Wheel of Fortune*, *Friday the 13th*) are ubiquitous. It is the America of superficial appearances. Tellingly, the window through which Zoyd jumps as a public act of insanity in order to collect his mental-disability check (which, we find out later, is part of a government scheme to keep him in place) is fake. Sound and slow motion effects are added by the TV stations in order to make it look and sound better than real life. The opening pages of *Vineland* make very clear that the images on the screen have come to determine what is bought and thought by the public. How deeply commercialization and, if you will, *Gleichschaltung*\(^\text{29}\) have affected society can not only be seen in the rather silly image of the police sirens playing the *Jeopardy* theme (Pynchon, *VL* 9) but also in the loggers-gone-metrosexual\(^\text{30}\) and in the kid who tells a Zoyd in drag (also part of his window stunt) that he “ought to be locked up” (Pynchon, *VL* 5).

In this setting, the old hippie Zoyd is a walking anachronism. “You and me Zoyd,” a friend tells him early in the novel, “we’re like Bigfoot. Times go on, we never change” (Pynchon, *VL* 7). What America has changed into and how it could come to this are major concerns of the novel. Even if Zoyd may not have changed, his ex-wife Frenesi, former member of the revolutionary film collective 24fps, has strayed far from her old ideals: her affair with government man Brock Vond contributed not only to the demise of 24fps but also sealed the fate

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\(^{28}\) Prairie’s “chair-high bag of Chee-tos” (Pynchon, *VL* 14) reappears in various incarnations throughout the novel, for example in a “giant-size sack of tortilla chips” (18) or in “monster-size snack bags” (89).

\(^{29}\) Considering the many references to fascism in the novel, the choice of word is certainly justified. *Gleichschaltung* was the term used by the Nazis to designate the attempt to synchronize and bring into line all aspects of public life.

\(^{30}\) They are sitting on “designer barstools, sipping kiwi mimosas” and all look “like models in Father’s Day ads” (Pynchon, *VL* 5-6).
of the “People’s Republic of Rock and Roll” (PR³), proclaimed at the College of the Surf several years prior to the main story line of the novel, which is eventually crushed by the military, government agents, and local police in what Richard Powers calls “a massacre midway between Kent State and Tiananmen Square” (691).³¹ Zoyd on the one hand and 24fps on the other represent two different forms of Sixties youth rebellion—the rather unpolitical, pot-smoking hippie, who wants to be left alone by The Man, and New Left revolutionaries who fight the system. The fate of the PR³—located ideologically halfway between Zoyd and 24fps—is representative of developments that affected the counterculture and the New Left alike. Both the hippie culture and the revolutionary film collective begin with “thinkin’ we’d beat them all,” as Zoyd puts it (Pynchon, VL 42), and are eventually confronted with government subversion and tragic failure. Zoyd’s move from Gordita Beach to the town of Vineland in the early Seventies thus marks the end of an era: “I guess it’s over” (Pynchon, VL 313), notes Mucho Maas, Oedipa’s ex-husband who has a cameo in the novel, at the beginning of Zoyd’s journey. The language turns nostalgic and elegiac during the description of the “great northerly migration” of the hippies (Pynchon, VL 318): as the “green free America” of Zoyd’s youth turns into “the heartless power of the scabland garrison state” (Pynchon, VL 314), Zoyd’s night ride on the bus towards Vineland reads like a swan song of the Sixties:

Aislemates struck up conversations, joints appeared and were lit, guitars came down from overhead racks and harmonicas out of fringe bags, and soon there was a concert that went on all night, a retrospective of the times they’d come through more or less as a generation, the singing of rock and roll, folk, Motown, fifties

³¹ The motif of fraternizing with the enemy is echoed in Frenesi’s father’s selling out to the anti-communist union in Hollywood (Pynchon, VL 251) and can also be found in Against the Day, in which Lake Traverse marries her father’s murderer. Since Lake is Frenesi’s great-grandaunt, this seems to be something that runs in the family. If the Traverses stand for the Old Left of unionists and (in some cases) anarchists, this shows the fragility of it all, the inherent tendency to sell out.
oldies, and at last, for about an hour just before the watery green sunrise, one
guitar and one harmonica, playing the blues. (Pynchon, VL 315)

How bleak the situation is in the present tense of the novel is illustrated by the
development of Vond’s “Political Re-Education Program” (PREP). By the Eighties, Vond’s
training camp for snitches has become obsolete because, as one character puts it, “since about
’81 kids were comín in all on their own askín about careers” (Pynchon, VL 347). With this, the
status quo in 1984 appears as the having come to pass of the paranoid fears of the characters of
Pynchon’s first three novels. If paranoia in Pynchon’s early work had to do with mysterious
forces, be it the Tristero or Gravity’s Rainbow’s “They,” in Vineland there is no question that the
government (in the form of DEA agent Zañiga, Vond, or Reagan’s National Security Decision
Directives) is indeed after Zoyd, Prairie, Frenesi, or 24fps. There is, to be sure, a nod towards
enigmatic and faceless forces similar to the Tristero or the Rocket Cartel in the subplot of
Takeshi Fumimota, who encounters mysterious visitors entering his airplane in midair and who
later investigates what seems to be a gigantic footprint that had destroyed a research lab, but for
the most part there is no doubt in Vineland who the perpetrators are. Not only is there an actual
villain (Vond) in the novel, but, in analogy to all the brand names and movie titles, the real life
figures of Presidents Nixon, Reagan, and Bush appear as sinister forces in the background that
are repeatedly linked with betrayal, repression, and misoneism. Given the existence of PREP,
the subversion of the PR³, Vond’s occupation of Zoyd’s house, and the air raids of CAMP (the
“Campaign Against Marijuana Production”), Takeshi’s adventures are the only remnant of

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32 Reagan’s participation in anti-communist efforts during his tenure as president of the Screen Actors Guild, for example, is described as “one of American misoneism’s most notable hours” (Pynchon, VL 289). Note also Frenesi’s observation that in the years after Nixon, “[t]he personnel changed, the Repression went on, growing wider, deeper, and less visible, regardless of the names in power” (Pynchon, VL 72).
classical Pynchonian paranoia. For most of the other characters, government surveillance and persecution have simply become the status quo.33

The view of 24fps member Ditzah that “restor[ing] fascism at home and around the world” is a fundamental part of the “Reagan program” (Pynchon, VL 265) is not only shared by several other characters34 but is validated in Pynchon’s universe by the fact that a former Luftwaffe officer helps the US government fly attacks against marijuana planters in Northern California—thus proving to be a “useful American citizen” (221)—and that, as we are told in Gravity’s Rainbow, Über-Nazi Blicero has equally been absorbed into postwar life: “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” (764). If in Gravity’s Rainbow “the real and only fucking is done on paper” (627), then Vineland transfers this into the 1980s: “it would all be done with keys on alphanumeric keyboards that stood for weightless, invisible chains of electronic presence or absence” (90). We have arrived in “the Amerikan dark” (235)35 in which “the real fucking” is done by pressing a button on a keyboard.

For an interesting discussion of this, see Knight’s take on Vineland in Conspiracy Culture, in which he argues “that the apparent absence of conspiracy in Vineland is part of a meaningful continuation of Pynchon’s dialogue with paranoia” (62). In Vineland’s America, notes Knight, “[w]hatever Oedipa was waiting for [at the end of The Crying of Lot 49] has already happened” (65).

34 For example Zoyd (Pynchon, VL 28) and some of the Traverses (Pynchon, VL 371).

35 A reference, perhaps, to the German spelling or to the Ku-Klux Klan?
filmmakers instead of writers. Although Weed Atman’s wife Jinx is described as a “close reader of cues others never saw” (Pynchon, *VL* 237), her reading is limited to reading people, and Zoyd’s friend Van Meter, “a lifetime searcher for meaning” (Pynchon, *VL* 9)—perhaps a nod to the paranoid reader—seems, like Zoyd, who longs for the “slower-moving” and “predigital” Sixties (Pynchon, *VL* 38), outdated and anachronistic. For representative readers, we have to look at TV junkie Hector Zuñiga and raised-on-television Prairie, who only knows the Sixties through “fast clips on the Tube” (Pynchon, *VL* 198).

Just as television permeates the lives of all major characters, the novel is suffused with references to movies, television hosts and characters, game shows, and sitcoms. Franzen’s observation that “[t]oday’s Baudelaires are hip-hop artists” (66) certainly applies here. Instead of references to Emily Dickinson or Rainer Maria Rilke as in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, we come across *The Brady Bunch* and Mr. Spock. The sheer mass of such allusions shows how deeply television has come to influence the lives of *Vineland*’s protagonists. The Tube replaces the after-sex cigarette (for Brock and Frenesi) and provides work atmosphere (for 24fps), company (for Frenesi’s old friend DL), someone to talk to (for Frenesi’s father), and distraction 24-7 (for Mucho). Even the Traverses, the “old, proud, and strong union people” (Pynchon, *VL* 320), cannot resist: during their family reunion in the last chapter of the novel, the Tube is always on. The ubiquity of television is also made clear in narrative comments such as “It was just before prime time” (Pynchon, *VL* 194). Television has even come to dominate our sense of time. The effects of the massive consumption can be seen in the fact that several characters’ perception of reality has changed. When Takeshi and DL, for example, tell their story in chapter nine, one of their listeners perceives the story as a sitcom and “[makes] a point to laugh about it a lot, trying to fill in for a live studio audience” (Pynchon, *VL* 179). Similarly, for Frenesi’s son Justin an

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36 See pages 212, 197, 141, 288, and 308, respectively.
argument between his parents becomes a version of *Space Invaders* (not quite TV, but almost): his father “launched complaints of different sizes at different speeds and Frenesi tried to deflect or neutralize them before her own defenses gave way” (Pynchon, *VL* 87).

Apart from the mysterious Thanatoids—surreal beings somewhere between life and death who live in a village near Vineland and who “spent at least part of every waking hour with an eye on the Tube” (Pynchon, *VL* 170-71)—the most literal incarnation of the couch potato and the embodiment of fears about the negative effects of television is, ironically, a DEA agent addicted to the Tube: Hector Zuñiga. For him, television has completely overridden reality. He has adopted the lingo of cop shows, hums TV theme songs, consumes television like a drug, and is eventually checked into a “Tubaldetox” facility, where he “[creeps] out of his ward at night to lurk anywhere Tubes might be glowing, to bathe in rays, lap and suck at the flow of image” (Pynchon, *VL* 335). A recurring image in *Vineland* is the application of the terminology of addiction and drug use to television. Not only are there Tubal rehab centers, we also read about characters who are tubed out or have overdosed on television (Pynchon, *VL* 53, 336). Television has literally become the opiate of the masses—an opiate that is sanctioned and tolerated by the government and thus exempt from the Vond, Zuñiga and Reagan’s War on Drugs.37 The notion of TV as a government sanctioned opiate is also reflected in Mucho’s take on the Tube, although he has completely given in to the temptations of television and money. Mucho’s view echoes not only a Slothropian notion of “Them” but also reflects contemporaneous convictions of both

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37 Zoyd’s marijuana use has been read by some critics as a kind of “TV bad, pot good” message (see for example Leithauser, par. 33). Booker offers a much more differentiated reading: Despite his fierce criticisms of American drug enforcement policies, Pynchon hardly presents the drug culture as a utopian alternative to contemporary society. On the contrary, Vineland continually suggests that drugs functioned in the sixties as a literal opiate of the masses that dulled the awareness of those involved in the counter-culture and helped the prevailing authorities to maintain and solidify their power. In a motif that echoes Foucault’s suggestion that official society attempts not to repress sexuality but to administer it, Pynchon suggests that U.S. drug enforcement procedures are intended not to eliminate drug use, but merely to circumscribe drug users as an official Other against whom they can exercise their official power. (92)
liberals and conservatives that television is controlled by their respective political opponents. Whereas some conservatives, such as Phillips, feared television was controlled by a left-leaning intelligentsia, Mucho is representative of liberal fears of the government exerting control through television: “They just let us forget. Give us too much to process, fill up every minute, keep us distracted, it’s what the Tube is for, and though it kills me to say it, it’s what rock and roll is becoming” (Pynchon, VL 314). The notion of television as a kind of “stupefying device” comes also up in a discussion at the Traverse-Becker family reunion in the last chapter. In a paragraph that I believe to be central to Vineland, the Traverses, who have, as we will read in Against the Day, fought the Man for generations, discuss the stupefying and illusion-creating (note the oxymoron “bright-colored shadows”) force of television and its connection with what they consider fascist tendencies in America: at their family reunion, “grandfolks could be heard arguing the perennial question of whether the United States still lingered in a prefascist twilight, or whether that darkness had fallen long stupefied years ago, and the light they thought they saw was coming only from millions of Tubes all showing the same bright-colored shadows” (Pynchon, VL 371). Only two pages later, Prairie’s boyfriend Isaiah puts it even more bluntly when he blames the failure of the Sixties revolution on the inability of those involved to understand television: “Minute the Tube got hold of you folks that was it, that whole alternative America, el deado meato, just like th’ Indians, sold it all to your real enemies, and even in 1970s dollars—it was way too cheap” (Pynchon, VL 373).

Vineland’s preoccupation with television allows for a variety of readings. The references to contemporary culture and society certainly echo concurrent critical theory with its interest in actual readers and its development towards cultural studies. More specifically, Vineland quite obviously reflects and comments on contemporary discussions about television. While Zuñiga

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38 Pynchon has, argues Chambers, answered this question “rather bleakly” (199).
and the Thanatoids are exaggerated caricatures of Petrucci’s, Allan Bloom’s, or Lazere’s anxieties, the comments by the Traverses and Isaiah seem to express genuine concern about the couch potatoizing influence of television. Early commentators did not quite know what to do with the novel. Did Vineland constitute a “deculturated” Pynchon or was it as a critique of contemporary culture and of what Franzen has called “the banal ascendancy of television” (58)? Slade, for example, suspected that Vineland “may be too trendy” for some readers and believed the allusions to television and popular culture to be “numerous enough to turn off academic audiences” (126), and Gray noted, “It is admittedly, disquieting to find a major author drawing cultural sustenance from The Brady Bunch and I Love Lucy instead of The Odyssey and the Bible” (par. 10). Cowart oscillated between both poles (deculturated Pynchon vs. critical commentary). While he considered “the density of reference to the ephemera of popular culture … almost numbing,” he also considered the novel “a devastating statement about the shortness of the American cultural memory” (“Attenuated” 71). With the second wave of criticism, the view that Vineland’s interpenetration with television and pop culture amounted to a critique of that very culture became more widespread. Chambers, for example, argued that Vineland showed the dark sides of television: “feeding escapism, annihilating the desire to read and the ability to write and spell, disturbing the distinction between real and staged violence” (Chambers 193), and Booker suggested that the “lack of references to ‘high culture’ in Vineland thus becomes a commentary on the degraded condition of a modern society in which high culture no longer has a place, much in the tradition of the lament for the death of high culture in The Waste Land of T.S. Eliot” (94).

This argument could be challenged by Cowart’s (rightful, I believe) observation that Pynchon seems to be “genuinely fond of much popular culture” (“Attenuated” 71). If Vineland is
a critique of television and contemporary culture, is this effort not undermined by the inclusion of all the pop? Aren’t messages along the lines of “TV distracts us from politics” or “there is no high culture in here because contemporary society is all surface” a little too simple? I believe that a key to understand the novel lies in the notion of Prairie as a resisting reader.

h. Everybody’s Kung Fu Fighting: Reader-Character Parallels in *Vineland*

In a flashback to Zoyd’s first encounter with Hector, we learn that Zoyd lived in Gordita Beach “shortly after Reagan was elected governor of California” (Pynchon, *VL* 22), namely 1967—which makes the time between Zoyd’s (up until Hector showed up) carefree and untroubled hippie life and the present tense of the novel seventeen years. Seventeen years is, of course, also the time span between the publication of *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Vineland*. The parallels between Zoyd’s longing for a lost time and several critics’ longing for the Pynchon of *Gravity’s Rainbow* suggest two things: not only is the “Pizzic Mandala” only one of several indicators of *Vineland*’s self-referentiality, but we are also made aware that we have to be on the lookout for reader-character parallels. It is, however, not Zoyd who continues Stencil, Oedipa, or Slothrop’s function to mirror our reading of the novels and to comment on contemporary reading practices but his daughter Prairie.

If *Gravity’s Rainbow* put us alongside Slothrop into the decentered Zone, then *Vineland* transfers us into Prairie’s America, and if the textual form of *Gravity’s Rainbow* served to create undecidability, confusion, fragmentation, and ambiguity, the structure of *Vineland* rather imitates the editing style of television. The quick cuts and flashbacks of chapter four, for example, are reminiscent of both the earlier mentioned “fast clips on the Tube” (Pynchon, *VL* 198) and of Moody’s description of “short segments, fast action, quick cuts, fades, dissolves” on MTV (qtd.
in Lazere 288): the chapter opens with Zoyd driving to meet two friends whose crawfish he delivers to various restaurants in the area. After a quick flashback to Zoyd’s initial encounter with them, there is another flashback to Zoyd’s childhood. Fast forward to Zoyd and Frenesi’s wedding and further on to a breakfast conversation with Prairie. Back in present time, Zoyd has arrived at his friends’ where he hears news about Hector, who has been asking about him. After a flashback to a conversation at a bar with Van Meter, we observe Zoyd driving through Vineland County delivering crawfish. Before he meets Prairie and Hector at a local Pizza parlor, there is a comical aside to a landscape contractor calling himself “The Marquis de Sod”—which corresponds to television’s ubiquitous commercial breaks. While this essentially all focuses on Zoyd, other chapters are even more episodic, switching in the style of soap operas or sitcoms between different focal characters. Chapter twelve, for example, starts with a third-person narrator “zooming in on the action”: landscape shot, Trasero County coast, zooming in on the clifftop campus of the College of the Surf, further zoom onto Dewey Plaza and marijuana smoke, then close-up of math professor Weed Atman. After 24fps arrives on campus, Frenesi becomes the focal character. After a short shift of focus to Prairie, who is watching some of the 24fps footage, the narrative follows Frenesi into a motel room with Brock Vond. The combination of the overproliferation of pop cultural allusions on the level of content and the formal imitation of TV editing styles leads to the reader’s total immersion in the culture the novel describes.

Whereas early commentators often fell into the trap of mistaking the novel’s form for a diminished Pynchon, most later commentators have rightly noted that Vineland is written, as Chambers puts it, “in the language and allusions of the diminished world we all inhabit” (202). What my reading clarifies is that this is part of Pynchon’s project to involve the readers in the very issues his characters are confronted with.
The language and the allusions of *Vineland* are different from Pynchon’s first three novels because they describe a distinctly different reading environment. Accordingly, the novel’s most important reader belongs to an entirely different generation than all other Pynchon characters we have come across thus far. Prairie is not only *Vineland*’s most obvious “reader,” but she is also representative of the above described resisting stance. Born several years after Stencil, Oedipa, and Slothrop tried to find their way through labyrinthine plots, she has been brought up on television, “bathing in Tubelight” as a baby (Pynchon, *VL* 286) and spending Saturday mornings watching movies (Pynchon, *VL* 192). She is a viewer rather than a reader. Significantly, she learns about her mother not through written documents or journals, like Stencil, but through watching 24fps footage. Let us consider Prairie’s journey towards becoming a resisting reader in terms of kung fu movies such as *The 36th Chamber of the Shaolin*. The stereotypical story line of “inexperienced and bright-eyed apprentice shows potential, enters training facility, is perhaps rejected at first, makes progress through strict and arduous training, and has to pass a final challenge or face the villain in order to graduate” certainly applies to Prairie’s experience in *Vineland*. Having perhaps inherited from her mother the ability to read between the lines, Prairie shows her potential early on. She considers her parents’ generation’s fads and beliefs “idiot peacenik stuff” (Pynchon, *VL* 16) and wonders if some of her dad’s theories amount to anything more than just “pothead paranoia” (Pynchon, *VL* 46). Furthermore, Prairie is apparently able to “handle” television—in contrast to Hector, whom television, it seems, has taken by surprise. Unlike Hector, “a real cop [who] has delusions that he is a TV

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39 This certainly also reads like a description of Luke Skywalker’s Jedi-training in *Star Wars*. Considering the fact, however, that that *Vineland*’s DL is a martial arts expert and member of the “Sisterhood of Kunoichi Attentives,” the Kung Fu metaphor, despite my intermingling of Chinese and Japanese traditions, seems more fitting.

40 For Frenesi’s reading between the lines, see for example: “Frenesi had absorbed politics all through her childhood, but later, seeing older movies on the Tube with her parents, making for the first time a connections between the far-off images and her real life, it seemed she had misunderstood everything, paying too much attention to the raw emotions, the easy conflicts, when something else, some finer drama the Movies had never considered worth ennobling had been unfolding all the time” (Pynchon, *VL* 81-82).
one,” as Powers puts it (693), Prairie knows to draw a line between TV and real life. Although she wishes, when escaping from Vond with DL and Takeshi, that they were “some family in a family car, with no problems that couldn’t be solved in half an hour of wisecracks and commercials” (Pynchon, VL 191), she knows that life is not a sitcom. After proving her potential, Prairie is taken in by teachers who direct and shape her talent. When she meets DL and is driven to the mountainside retreat of the “Sisterhood of the Kunoichi Attentives,” a school for female Ninjas, her real training begins. It is here that she first learns about her mother through computer files and that, as “Head Ninjette” Sister Rochelle tells her, “knowledge won’t come down all at once in any big transcendent moment” (112). Sister Rochelle, who also teaches a story about a female Garden of Eden (Pynchon, VL 166)—although admittedly not to Prairie—is a prototypical feminist resisting reader and thus an indicator of the direction of Prairie’s apprenticeship. The next steps in Prairie’s education are DL and Takeshi’s stories and watching the 24fps archives. Throughout her training, she shows her progress by continually interrupting the stories.41 Her comments “I knew it!” (in response to the first hints at a relationship between Frenesi and Brock Vond), “Now wait a minute,” or “My mom killed a guy?” (Pynchon, VL 141, 151, 188) show her as a skeptical, attentive, and resistant receiver. Her visit to a shopping mall in Hollywood with her friend Ché at the beginning of the last chapter marks the end of her apprenticeship and shows that she has indeed become a resisting reader.42 Just as everyday America has been trivialized, commercialized, and McDonaldized in the novel, the “Noir Center,” a film noir-themed mall, epitomizes what Prairie sees as the “yuppification” of 1940s movies. If the Zone stands for Slothrop’s reading environment, this is what the Noir Center

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41 Since DL or Takeshi’s voice blends with the narrator’s voice in these parts, Prairie’s interruptions are literal interruptions that remind us of the narrative frame.

42 Ché, like Prairie, is a ray of hope in the novel. She is upset with her mom for watching MTV all day (Pynchon, VL 329). This is not only a satirical inversion of stereotypical child-parent roles but may be considered an indicator that some kids are able, unlike their parents, to resist television.
represents for Prairie. Significantly, Prairie and Ché show an anarchic defiance of this temple of commerce: instead of participating in happy consumption, they steal an “amazing … volume of underwear” from Macy’s (Pynchon, VL 332). More importantly, however, Prairie looks through the “uniform commercial twilight” (Pynchon, VL 329): “she personally resented this increasingly dumb attempt to cash in on the pseudoromantic mystique of those particular olden days in this town, having heard enough stories from [her grandparents] to know better than most how corrupted everything had really been from top to bottom” (Pynchon, VL 326). Apprentice resisting reader Prairie has passed her final test and can now face the villain, Brock Vond. Having completed her apprenticeship, she is embraced by the other Traverses as “a true Traverse” (Pynchon, VL 320). She is their hope for redemption that may be able to avoid the mistakes of Frenesi and Zoyd’s generation and thus, as Chambers rightly claims, “Pynchon’s gesture towards renewal” (203). If the New Left of the Sixties failed because they, as Isaiah puts it, “didn’t understand much about the Tube” (Pynchon, VL 373), then Prairie who does understand it, may be able to resist it. Although Prairie is not free from the weaknesses of her mother, her knowledge of television culture, along with her education about her mother’s (and perhaps also her mother’s generation’s) mistakes constitutes hope for the future. Vineland, argues Booker, “finally suggests that positive action is possible, provided that the participants have sufficient theoretical awareness to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past” (88). If the “Noir Center” with its plastic lifelessness, its brown-uniformed (of course!) security police, and its mineral-water boutiques is a microcosm of Vineland’s America, then Prairie has shown that she is, in Kolodny’s words, able to “dance through the minefield” and that she has become a sorely needed resisting reader.
If our own apprenticeship through Pynchon’s first three novels has taught us anything, we
should know by now that Prairie’s resisting stance possibly tells us something about our own
reading. And sure enough, the last chapter (perhaps also our graduating exam from Kung Fu
school?) gives us plenty of opportunity to say, with Prairie, “Now wait a minute.” If the quest for
V., the Tristero, or the Rocket is replaced in *Vineland* by the quest for the mother, as Conner has
argued (72), one cannot help but notice that the page-long reunion between Prairie and Frenesi is
rather anticlimactic. Are we supposed to read it as a happy ending, as some critics have done? 

There is, to be sure, a family reunion at the end of *Vineland*, Prairie finally meets her mother, DL
and Takeshi re-negotiate their “no-sex clause,” and the bad guy is defeated. Are we, however,
supposed to believe that Zoyd, Prairie, and Frenesi’s parents have nothing critical to say to
Frenesi? Do Frenesi’s critical thoughts about “the State law-enforcement apparatus that was
calling itself ‘America’” and her opposition to Hector’s “Tubal fantasies” and right-wing cop
shows (Pynchon, *VL* 354, 345) mean that she is rehabilitating? I believe we ought to be skeptical
and that the ending constitutes a calculated move designed to trigger an uneasy feeling—or, if
you will, an oppositional stance. There are, after all, several dampers that spoil the happy ending:
first of all, as already mentioned, even at the family reunion the Tube is ever-present. If
television is a mind-numbing distraction and one of the secret villains of *Vineland*, then it is
certainly not a good sign that even the Traverses cannot seem to be without it. Secondly,
although Vond is gone at the end of the novel, it is obvious that there are still sinister forces out

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43 The coming together of the Traverse family, the reunion of mother and daughter, and the sense of community are
surely a far cry from the waterspout that kills Sidney Stencil at the end of *V.* or Slothrop’s scattering and the descent
of the rocket at the end of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Conner, for whom *Vineland* constitutes a “major aesthetic shift” (65)
—from the sublime to the beautiful—in Pynchon’s work, has therefore argued that in *Vineland* “the individual is
conserved, sheltered, and healed,” whereas Pynchon’s first three novels depicted the “fragmentation and dispersion
of the individual will and consciousness” (81). Similarly, for Edward Mendelson, the end of *Vineland* signals
renewal and the end of an interregnum in which the older generation fulfilled the younger generation’s yearning for
parental discipline: “At the end of *Vineland* this era ends, not with an apocalyptic upheaval, which would mark the
end of time, but in a refusal of apocalypse, when human time renews itself, and death and life regain their dominion”
(“Levity” 44).
there. *Vineland* is no *Return of the Jedi*, in which the evil empire is defeated at the end. Pynchon makes sure to emphasize that Reagan is still pulling the strings in the background and that what is up ahead does not look that promising either. There will, it seems, always be “some white male far away” (Pynchon, *VL* 376). It is 1984, after all, and Reagan will be reelected in November. The “faceless predators” (Pynchon, *VL* 383) that are after Takeshi are still at large, and young folks, we recall, are signing up for government jobs voluntarily. And thirdly, we should not forget that *Vineland* almost ends like Orwell’s *1984*. Prairie’s call to the just vanished Brock Vond, “You can come back … It’s OK, rilly. Come on, come in. I don’t care. Take me anywhere you want” (Pynchon, *VL* 384), comes dangerously close to Winston Smith’s final admittance in *1984* — “But it was all right, everything was all right, the struggle was finished. He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother” (Orwell 308)—and emphasizes the fragility of the “victory” at the end of *Vineland*. I believe that Powers and Frank McConnell are right in calling the novel a “fairy tale” (Powers 697, F. McConnell par. 11) and that Booker is right in pointing out that there is “a great deal of parody in this mock-romance ending, and all of the rest of the book warns us against the expectation of easy solutions to all our problems” (98).

### i. Recalibrating *Vineland*

If we have followed Prairie thus far and resisted the “mock romance ending,” we may next ask ourselves “so what?”. What does all this really add up to? That contemporary culture has declined, Reagan is bad, TV makes us inert, and that we, in response, have to resist, read books, read between the lines, and be skeptical? If this is the case, I believe that Brad

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44 One character links George Bush and the CIA to fishy drug control deals: “Harken unto me, read thou my lips, for verily that wheresoever the CIA putteth in its meathooks upon the world, there also are to be found those substances which God may have created but the U.S. Code hath decided to control. Get me? Now old Bush used to be the head of CIA, so you figure it out” (Pynchon, *VL* 354).
Leithauser’s question “For whom is this intended?” (par. 1) is entirely justified. Even if *Vineland* has more mainstream appeal than *Gravity’s Rainbow*, wouldn’t Pynchon be preaching to the choir? Doesn’t Pynchon’s audience already consist of people who are not only readers but who also may agree with the impulse to resist America Incorporated? I suggest that this is just the surface of the novel. When Kermode discusses the “almost sentimental rhetoric” or the “sophisticated melancholia” (3-4) of *Vineland*, when Cowart notes the “depressing litany” of pop cultural allusions (71), and when Knight argues that “in *Vineland* there is only the obvious” (71), they fall victim to the superficial appearance of the novel. Recalibrating *Vineland* thus means letting our reading be guided by the notion that the novel exhibits Pynchon’s continued preoccupation with reading.

Let us look at Prairie again. I believe that she teaches us two things: not only do her story and her environment show the importance and difficulty of oppositional reading but by repeatedly interrupting the narrative flow of the novel she also reminds us of the fact that the stories about Frenesi’s or DL’s past are not objective accounts of a third-person narrator but interpretations or stories told by other characters. As such, we are, as Robert McLaughlin rightly observes, discouraged “from suspending our skepticism and accepting the stories as the objective truth of what happened” (117). This certainly brings to mind Flynn and Schweickart’s aforementioned suggestion of history as “a constructed representation of events” (*Reading Sites* 10). *Vineland*, then, apparently encourages us to do a “renegade reading” which puts the novel’s entire construction of history, of the Sixties and of Reagan’s America, into question. If the novel thus deconstructs its own representation of historical events, it equally presents its other elements as constructs that are to be questioned. Accepting Prairie as a resisting reader and accepting the notion that in her we have a model to be followed points towards an oppositional reading. If we
consequently follow Prairie, we should finally resist the text itself and not just the culture presented in the text. We thus should move from simply questioning the pop cultural allusions or television culture to a questioning of what Conner calls “a vision of forgiveness and reconciliation” (Conner 77), of the happy ending, of the seeming nostalgia, and of simple slogans like “TV is bad” or “Reagan is bad.”

The seeming contradiction between my argument that Pynchon inscribes a resisting stance in his text and Fetterly’s notion of resisting in the sense of reading against a text is resolved if we accept that the audience that is superficially inscribed in Vineland is a television audience. Just as Fetterley describes the need to resist the inscribed male perspective, I believe that Vineland encourages us to resist the inscribed television perspective. Only in resisting the superficial appearance, in resisting superficial readings will we “protect ourselves,” as Kolodny put it, “from the temptation to oversimplify any text” (110-111). Once we recall what Hayden Johnson has said about television—that it deals “in slogans, myths, happy endings, and fragmentary images” and that it has “a short attention span” (140)—it becomes obvious that a reduction of Vineland to slogans, myths, or happy endings falls into the trap of not moving beyond superficiality. The novel makes us part of an experiment in which we are distracted by appearances and lulled into accepting superficial messages—we become stereotypical TV consumers. As such, Vineland makes an important point about reading.

It is not just television that can lull people into unthinking and uncritical acceptance: reading can do the same thing. It can be escapist and equally cater to a need for slogans, simple messages, and happy endings.\(^\text{45}\) This shows that simply blaming cultural decline on the Tube is a naïve view. Similarly, the notion of reading as a cure (interestingly held by both the left and the

\(^{45}\) We can make an interesting connection here with Powers and McConnell’s notion of Vineland as a fairy tale. Don’t we associate fairy tales with magic, untruth, and escapism, but also consider them as doing interpellative cultural work?
right) is also dismantled as naïve and unproductive. The many critics who were deflected by the superficial appearance of *Vineland* proved in a way that they were not better than the television viewers so many intellectuals decried. All this shows *Vineland*, contrary to what Cowart has argued,⁴⁶ as a highly self-reflexive novel that complicates the simple slogans of the Culture Wars and, both in its meta-comment on reading and in its moving away from the “high theory” of the preceding decades, anticipates the “theory mess” and the “meta-readers” of the decade ahead.

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⁴⁶ In “Attenuated Postmodernism,” Cowart writes, “*Vineland* does not seem to be ‘self-reflective’ in the approved contemporary manner—a manner that, in all three of his previous novels, Pynchon has shown he can execute brilliantly” (70).
In 1990, Alvin Kernan proclaimed the *The Death of Literature*. Echoing concerns about television such as the ones I have described in the preceding chapter, Kernan is afraid that “[c]ultural obsolescence … has overtaken the old literature in a world where television is transforming everything it touches” (10) and that, “as readers turn into viewers, as the skill of reading diminishes, and as the world as seen through a television screen feels and looks more pictorial and immediate, belief in a word-based literature will inevitably diminish” (151).\(^1\) While the proclaimed death of literature most likely went unnoticed by the majority of readers, another “death” a year later was hard to ignore: the end of the Soviet Union in 1991. In Hobsbawm’s *Age of Extremes*, the collapse of the USSR marks the end of the “Short Twentieth Century.”

Published in 1994, Hobsbawm’s book shows the deep insecurity felt after 1991. Facing a world lacking “any international system or structure” (559), Hobsbawm sees the Short Twentieth Century ending “in a global disorder whose nature was unclear, and without an obvious mechanism for either ending it or keeping it under control” (562). Hobsbawm’s description of the post-Cold War status quo sounds very similar to the “post-theory” situation in American universities. No new dominant paradigm had emerged in theory except for the somewhat woolly term *cultural studies* subsuming a plurality of convictions and methods. The continued animosity

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\(^1\) See also Jeremy G. Butler’s remark in *Television Style*: “A printed book may well the worst medium in which to discuss the quickly accelerating and recondite changes going on in television today” (138).
toward French theory, the ongoing culture wars, and the real-life examples of the O.J. Simpson trial and the Lewinsky Affair, which were used as negative examples for a permissive relativism, further contributed to heated discussions about literary theory. Many scholars perceived theory to be in a state of disorder wondering how it could be kept under control. Should there be a return to aestheticism or formalism? Should theory be abandoned altogether? Was the pluralist approach of cultural studies the only option? While questions like these were certainly nothing new, they gained a new urgency during the Nineties and helped create a particular meta-awareness in reading and theory.

Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon*, published in 1997, portrays a world in which the new transforms the old in ways equally as dramatic as Kernan’s scenario and reflects the bickering of various factions of readers in both its narrative frame and its content. Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon’s drawing of border lines in the American provinces between 1764 and 1768 constitutes the intrusion of science and reason into a world yet uncharted, into a pre-Enlightenment world full of magic, superstition, and desire. Many critics have picked up on the concept of the line as the book’s central metaphor. David Cowart, for example, considers “the surveying of the Mason-Dixon Line as symbol of and index to the forces that would become America” (“Luddite” 342) and points out the novel’s “interest in the struggle between scientific rationalism and the perennial yearning for mystical possibility” (“Luddite” 344). Similarly, Samuel Cohen considers the telling of “the story of the Enlightenment” (267) a central aspect of the novel. He notes, “In a nascent America, a creation of the Enlightenment, [Mason and

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2 One need only think of Northrop Frye’s, Murray Krieger’s, or Frank Lentricchia’s accounts of the history of literary theory.

3 To 75% positive, 20% ambivalent, and 5% “outright hostile” reviews, as Charles Clerc observes (9). His *Mason & Dixon & Pynchon* contains a very thorough overview of *Mason & Dixon*’s critical reception (9-38). See also Keesey’s “*Mason & Dixon* on the Line: A Reception Study.”
Dixon’s] applications of science to government, of rationality to the wilderness, embody the claims of the Age of Reason” (267).

Numerous critics have considered *Mason & Dixon* as a comment on or revision of accounts of the Enlightenment, as can be seen in several essays in Brooke Horvath and Irving Malin’s *Pynchon and Mason & Dixon*. Additionally, the novel has often been read as a comment on America or as an example of Linda Hutcheon’s “historiographic metafiction.” Despite the apparent metafictional quality and the obvious reference to reading in the opening pages of the book, there is an astonishing absence of critical accounts dealing with issues of reading in Pynchon’s fifth novel. If reading was mentioned in the first wave of criticism after the novel’s initial release, it was mostly in comments on the novel’s length or difficulty. Cowart’s article is quite representative for the second wave of criticism. He briefly mentions that “Pynchon seduces his readers into actions that mirror those of his questing protagonists” (“Luddite” 360) but never quite follows this train of thought. Taking into account what I consider a clear thematic presence of reading in the novel, my account of *Mason & Dixon* not only demonstrates that the book reflects the anxious questions in critical theory of the time but also offers, perhaps, a way out of what Herman Rapaport has styled “the theory mess.”

b. Paving the Way for the Theory Mess

In many ways the state of theory and reading in the 1990s constitutes both the continuation and culmination of developments of the 1980s. Books such as Kernan’s *The Death of Literature*, D’Souza’s *Illiberal Education*, and Ellis’s *Literature Lost* carried Culture Wars topics into the Nineties, where the “against theory” debates and the discussions about relativism⁴

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⁴ For an overview of the “against theory” debates, including Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels’s article of the same title, see W.J.T. Mitchell’s *Against Theory. Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism*. See also Loren
were rekindled and aggravated by the public discussion of the O.J. Simpson trial and the Lewinsky affair, which provided the Culture Warriors with real-life examples for their arguments. Continued attacks on French theory and the growing influence of cultural studies further contributed to the theory mess. By the end of the decade, MLA president Edward Said called for “restoring intellectual coherence” (as was the title of his essay in the MLA Newsletter in the spring 1999) and bemoaned “an often reckless abandonment of what could be a common intellectual pursuit in favor of highly specialized, exclusivist, and rebarbative approaches that destroy and undercut the historical as well as social bases of the humanities” (3).

What had occurred? Even if the beginning of the Nineties witnessed events with enormous political repercussions that marked a decided break with the preceding decade, there were plenty of issues that did not just disappear with the end of the Eighties. The Culture Wars debates were far from over and critical theory, curricula, and the politics of education continued to be discussed inside and outside of the academy. French theory remained the target of attacks and public denouncements: not only in Kernan’s and D’Souza’s books but also in the 1992 “Cambridge Affair” when twenty philosophers wrote a letter to the London Times protesting against Cambridge University’s plan to award Derrida an honorary degree. In the second half of the decade, the opponents of poststructuralist or deconstructionist thought saw themselves confirmed by the Sokal Affair and the subsequent publication of Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont’s Fashionable Nonsense, in which they discredited several poststructuralist or postmodern thinkers accusing them of “the repeated abuse of concepts and terminology coming

Glass’s “The End of Culture.” For discussions of relativism, see for example Clifford Geertz’s “Anti-Anti-Relativism” or Christopher Norris’s Reclaiming Truth. Contribution to a Critique of Cultural Relativism.

5 In his article “Clinton, Impeachment, and the Culture Wars,” James L. Guth argues that “Clinton’s first major political moves … escalated the culture wars” (208) and that his presidency “may ultimately be remembered … as a period in which new cultural divisions in American politics solidified” (222).

6 In 1996, Alan Sokal published a bogus article entitled “Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity” in the journal Social Text. His subsequent revelation of the hoax caused quite a stir.
from mathematics and physics” (4) or of “shamelessly throwing around technical terms in a context where they are completely irrelevant” (5). Both “affairs”—Cambridge and Sokal—provided much fuel for discussions and were visible indicators not only of the deep divisions between the various combatants but also of the increasing convergence of different registers: questions of relativism, language, and literary criticism came increasingly intertwined with Culture War discussions and political debates.

The O.J. Simpson trials of 1995 and 1997 and the Lewinsky affair of 1998 are prominent examples and indices of the impact of socio-political events on discussions of critical theory of the decade. Both episodes confronted the public with questions of linguistics, of the tension between political interests and universalistic concepts of justice, and of truth. What does “sexual relations” mean? What is the difference between “murder” and “wrongful deaths”? Exactly what do you mean by “is”? The ensuing debates about morality, honesty, and right-wing conspiracies, along with ongoing discussions of education, multiculturalism, and political correctness show that the Culture Wars were far from over—or, rather, that they had reached a climax in what Neal Gabler called “the year of Monica” (par. 1). Although distortions of the claims of Derrida & Co had been an often seen component of Culture Wars texts of the Eighties, the use of real-life examples for purposes of discrediting critical theory became significantly more widespread under the “postmodern” presidency of Bill Clinton. A case in point is Robert S. Robins and Jerrold M. Post’s 1997 book Political Paranoia. The Psychopolitics of Hatred, in which they blame deconstruction for blurring the lines between fact and fiction and for its perceived permissiveness in questions of truth: “Truth is itself a shifting concept whereby the political interests of the creator and the audience … define what is true. If what is presented persuades

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7 Randy Roberts’s portrayal of Clinton as “America’s first postmodern president” (212) and Shawn J. Parry-Giles and Trevor Parry-Giles’s Constructing Clinton. Hyperreality and Presidential Image-Making in Postmodern Politics also illustrate the application of concepts and terminology of critical theory to political and cultural issues.
people that it is true and if this truth is ‘politically progressive,’ then the events presented in the text are true” (241). Because it illustrated a similarly shifty concept of truth, Gabler, sees in the Simpson trial “deconstruction’s coming-out party” (par. 6):

To those who thought Simpson clearly guilty, the evidence provided objective proof that he had committed the murders: the bloody glove, the DNA analysis. On the other hand, to those who found Simpson innocent, this so-called proof was a collaboration between the L.A. Police Department and white Americans to provide a ‘text’ in which Simpson would seem guilty. In other words, there was no one objective truth; there were only different versions of the truth. (par. 6)

Gabler’s Los Angeles Times article thus portrays both the O.J. Simpson trial and the Lewinsky affair as examples of the “embrace of deconstruction in modern America” (par. 2). Clinton’s “taking refuge in narrow legalisms,” Gabler argues, “was really taking refuge in a deconstructionist view of reality” (par. 7). The debates over the impeachment of Clinton were therefore, according to Gabler, between absolutists and relativists: “The battle between Republicans and Democrats, and between Clinton’s attackers and his defenders, is really a battle of one truth versus many truths, of fanatics versus relativists, of moral absolutism versus moral fuzziness, of an essentially religious view of politics versus a secular view of politics” (par. 15). It could be argued that in the end the far fields of justice, race, party politics, and truth involved in these two examples boil down to questions of hermeneutics and interpretation and that the O.J. Simpson trial and the Lewinsky affair are indices for the increasing difficulty to draw a line between the public and the academic sphere. Politics came to play an important role in the theoretical debates in the universities while simplified versions of theoretical lingo also figured in social and political debates.
Whereas Gabler describes the conflict over Clinton’s impeachment as taking place between absolutists and relativists, thus aligning absolutism with Republicans and relativism with Democrats, the situation in the academy was not quite as simple. Leftists such as Eagleton or Hobsbawm were just as opposed to relativism as conservatives. As Marxists and conservatives spoke out against postmodern relativism or traditionalists and progressives joined forces to defend theory against anti-theorists, it became increasingly hard to sketch out a “conservative” or “progressive” position. The pluralism and politicization of reading described in the previous chapter culminated in heated debates about the nature and aims of theory. What had begun as often misinformed remarks against French thought in conservative Culture War texts turned into full blown “theory wars.” Since cultural studies had opened up the scope of subjects found worthy of critical attention, it should not come as a surprise that events such as the Gulf War, the Rodney King and O.J. Simpson trials, and the exploits of President Clinton all contributed to the heated climate. Depending on where one stood, concepts such as Jean Baudrillard’s “simulacra,” poststructuralism’s “endless deferral,” or postmodern notions of “anything goes” were considered theoretical constructs worthy of defense, “fashionable nonsense,” or dangerous subversions of Western culture.

c. The Theory Mess and the Fate of Reading

Even a cursory glance at the critical scene of the 1990s reveals that the “playful pluralism” which Kolodny had advocated in “Dancing through the Minefield” (110-11) had become a defining feature of literary theory. This pluralism had, to be sure, ceased to be “playful,” but rather contributed to critical theory’s particularly “messy” state and to what Rapaport has called “nasty ideological and methodological factionalism” (90). Looking back in
2001 onto the proliferation and pluralization of theory during the preceding decades, Rapaport considers the late Nineties “a time of intellectual deflation” (xi). While his book *The Theory Mess* focuses mainly on the American response to Derrida, Rapaport is clearly concerned about the “overproliferation of theoretical modes” (xi), about the waning influence of literary criticism as opposed to social studies, and about a kind of dogmatism resulting from the reading habits of “socially-oriented readers whose main interest was to study literature as a social text for purposes of political activism within and outside the university” (Rapaport 93). Some of such socially-oriented readers, however, equally polemicized against cultural studies and the state of literary theory. Terry Eagleton, one of the writers whom Rapaport targets, for example, laments the decline of high cultural theory into postmodern cultural studies, which he finds to be full of jargon, depoliticized, shallow, and vain. Cultural studies often has come to mean, writes Eagleton, something like “working on the history of pubic hair while half of the world’s population lacks adequate sanitation and survives on less than two dollars a day” (*After Theory* 6). Both Rapaport’s and Eagleton’s books were contributions to and results of the “theory wars.” While attempting to unravel the theory mess, both authors defended their notions of what theory should be like. Rapaport defends Derrida, deconstruction, and literary (as opposed to social) study. Eagleton argues against postmodernism and relativism and champions a politically aware cultural theory informed by Marxism. Both of them defend theory against pronouncements of the death of theory. Rapaport writes that “one could cynically hypothesize”

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8 Rapaport considers Derrida’s reception in the U.S. as mostly a history of misinterpretation, uninformed judgment or purposive eclipsing of Derrida’s theories. Examples include Meyer Abrams’s *The Deconstructive Angel*, Gerald Graff’s *Literature Against Itself*, and Fredric Jameson’s *The Prison-House of Language*.
9 Of course, one could argue that Eagleton is partly responsible for the rise of cultural studies. Rapaport, for example, considers Eagleton’s *Literary Theory* as an attempt to discredit literary hermeneutics in order to “clear the way for cultural as opposed to literary study” (33). *After Theory* could therefore be seen as somewhat of a retrospective *Zauberlehrling* attempt to control or dispose of the spirits conjured up.
10 He notes that he is “fully aware that Derrida doesn’t need anyone to defend deconstruction for him” but that “few people have openly defended deconstruction against its adversaries” (xx).
that “many academics are hopeful that critical theory will self-destruct if it subjects itself to enough conflicts and contradictions” (xix). Against such hopes, Eagleton remarks: “Those to whom the title of this book [After Theory] suggests that ‘theory’ is now over, and that we can all relievedly return to an age of pre-theoretical innocence, are in for a disappointment” (1). They are joined by, for example, Vincent Leitch, who writes in Theory Matters that “there is no going back to some pre- or nontheoretical literary study” (16).

There have, of course, been plenty of attempts to go back just there. Kurt Spellmeyer, in a 1996 article, suggested a return to “the idea of ‘the arts’ …—the arts imagined as traditions of experience that intensify our sense of living in and with the world” (894). His opposition to deconstructionists recalls Helen Vendler’s 1980 MLA presidential address in which she bemoaned a childlike “innocence before the text” (qtd. in Graff, Professing 254). Valentine Cunningham’s Reading After Theory and Steven Carter’s Devotions to the Text both favor a close reading of canonical masterpieces. Frustrated with postmodern relativism and politics of political correctness, Carter attempts to focus on the aesthetic aspects of the text. While he acknowledges that the American formalists “were wrong to suggest that a work of art exists in an esthetic vacuum” (14), he still argues that “students must be taught all over again how to devote themselves to the text—to discriminate in terms dictated not by ideologies brought to the text but by the text itself” (15). Carter further notes that “English Departments may yet be reclaimed by persons who respect and revere great literature every bit as much as the forces of political correctness openly revile it” (2).

Carter’s call for a return to close reading and aestheticism was answered in many creative writing departments. While literature departments often turned towards cultural studies, in which Jay Z’s lyrics, movies, and TV commercials were analyzed and interpreted, numerous creative
writing departments, whose number tripled between 1980 and 2000 (Myers 146), maintained a traditional close reading of canonical texts worthy of emulation. David G. Myers’s claim in *The Elephants Teach* that “[c]reative writing was the knowledge of how literary texts are made, how they work” (159) and that these programs thus taught “reading as a writer” (158) not only constitutes yet another set of methods and convictions in the theory mess but can also be seen as the embodiment of the postmodern blurring the lines between readers and writers. Geoffrey Hartman’s insistence in *Criticism in the Wilderness* that there are “forms of critical commentary … that challenge the dichotomy of reading and writing” (20), finds a literal expression for example in a text such as Nicholson Baker’s *U and I* and at the yearly AWP conference where writers mingle with their readers who are themselves writers. What “reading as a writer” means is a slow and deliberate close reading. Tom Grimes considers “writers [as] readers moved to emulation” (554) and notes that “[s]tudying literature, noting its technical graces, slows the writer down, makes one pay attention to his or her own work until, finally, one is capable of selecting the right word, the best phrase or sentence rhythm, the perfect action to illuminate character and move the story forward” (13). Such a slow and careful reading, which focuses on the nuts and bolts of the craft of writing, is also what Francine Prose promotes in her 2006 book *Reading Like a Writer*.

The growing influence of cultural studies and creative writing programs, the continuing Culture Wars, and the debates about theory had a profound impact on reading practices during the decade. Considering the contemporaneous attacks on Derrida and French theory, it is ironic that critical theory in the Nineties seemed like a case example of poststructuralist notions of

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11 See for example this description in Tom Grimes’s *The Workshop*: “What is judged in Workshop, generally by the process of ‘close reading,’ is the executed result of the author’s intentions. Workshop doesn’t care about what you meant to say, or how you feel about what you said, it cares about what was said, the ‘words on the page.’ Like New Criticism, it examines texts without regard to authorial desire” (Grimes 4).
fragmentation and “decentering.” In Living with Theory, Leitch has described the situation as “the postmodernization of literary studies” (135). Elsewhere, he writes that “academics have almost all increasingly become critical pasticheurs mixing and matching heterogeneous strands into usable materials” (Theory Matters 27). In analogy to what Leitch calls the “hybridization of theory” (Theory Matters 27), we can thus speak of the hybridization of reading. Rapaport uses a vivid metaphor for critical reading in the theory mess: instead of following one strict set of methods, readers move freely through “a supermarket of ideas” (xix). In the Nineties we therefore see representatives of the very reading paradigms I have been discussing: paranoid readers, doubtful readers, resisting readers, and readers who seem to retreat once more into an ivory tower.

What I call meta-reading addresses this complex set of issues in two ways. Not only does it indicate that reading in the Nineties is literally “beyond” (Greek µετα) any single theoretical approach and methodology, it also indicates an increased (meta-) awareness of the theoretical and cultural underpinnings of one’s reading. The debates about theory, the reading writers of creative writing departments, and the interest of cultural studies in actual readers, as well as in the history, material conditions, and social dynamics of reading, have contributed to this awareness. When I speak of “meta-readers,” I mean it therefore in a similar sense as Hayden

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12 This, according to Leitch, is expressed in the following characteristics:
the divide between high and low cultures weakens; the modern autonomy of spheres erodes; crises of representation occur; new social movements (notably women’s and civil rights ones) displace traditional political parties as innovative forces; societies become explicitly, sometimes, officially, multicultural; big government, big labor, and big business get downsized (unevenly to be sure); the human subject becomes a decentered posthuman cyborg, occupying multiple subject positions; the multiversity replaces the college; new disciplines like women’s, ethnic, postcolonial, and cultural studies arise; and grand narratives undergo deconstruction. (Living 135)

White when he speaks of “meta-history.” If meta-history is a historiography which does away with “the myth of objectivity” (White 52) and which is aware not only of its own historical and cultural situatedness but also of its use of cognitive patterns in the construction of historiographical “plots,” then by analogy the meta-reader is aware of how cognitive patterns, external factors, literary theories, and the material conditions of a text influence his or her reading.

d. Criticism in the Wilderness: Readers in *Mason & Dixon*

More than any other of Pynchon’s novels, *Mason & Dixon* draws our attention to reading right away. The grain patterns of a wooden card table at the LeSpark House, where the novel starts, which cause “an illusion of Depth into which for years children have gaz’d as into the illustrated Pages of Books” (Pynchon, *MD* 5), make clear that reading will be an important concern of the text. At the same time, the “mismatch’d side-benches” and the “odd Chairs” (5) around the table hint at the hybridization and “messiness” of reading. This scene at the LeSpark residence is part of the novel’s narrative frame: the story of Mason and Dixon is narrated by Reverend Wicks Cherrycoke, who spends the winter of 1786 with his sister’s family in Philadelphia. He is allowed to stay under the condition that he keep the children entertained. Eventually, he tells them about Mason and Dixon, their experiences in Cape Town, South Africa, during the Transit of Venus in 1761, and their drawing of the Mason-Dixon Line. This narrative frame provides the audience (soon the entire family—including cousins, an aunt, and uncles) with ample opportunity to interrupt, reimagine, or challenge the story, and thus continue Prairie’s role in *Vineland*. Cherrycoke’s audience (or readership, if you will) is quite heterogeneous: his

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14 Thus, according to White, taking account of “differences of opinion in the suggestion of doubt as to its own authority which it systematically displays on its very surface” (1).
young nephews Pitt and Pliny want to hear adventure stories, their sister Tenebrae wants
romance and mystery, their cousins Ethelmer and DePugh, both college students, involve
Cherrycoke in “philosophickal” discussions, and Cherrycoke’s brothers-in-law often challenge
the likelihood or truthfulness of his stories. This narrative frame reflects on a small scale the
hybridization of reading and draws our attention again and again to metafictional questions: not
only is Cherrycoke’s narrative full of references to and discussions of reading, be it South
African slaves “reading” their masters’ laundry (Pynchon, MD 88-89) or one of Mason and
Dixon’s crewmembers telling his son that he is “wasting too damn’d much time reading Books”
(Pynchon, MD 457), he and his listeners also discuss questions of historiography, truth, doubt,
morality, and interpretation.

Cherrycoke, who is both observer/witness/reader and historian/narrator/writer, reflects
Hartman’s aforementioned challenging of the dichotomy of reading and writing in Criticism in
the Wilderness and anticipates the hybrid status of the novel’s title characters. He is a reader both
in his observing Mason and Dixon’s progress as an eyewitness and in his citing from and
interpretation of Mason’s “field-book” and “hidden Journal” (Pynchon, MD 341, 408, 433). He
is a writer in his writing about Mason and Dixon in “a scarr’d old Note-book” (Pynchon, MD 8)
and in his telling the story to his family. The figure of Cherrycoke, perhaps Pynchon’s stand-in in
the novel (a notion that is underscored by Cherrycoke’s sympathy for the preterite15), gives life
to the short and sometimes enigmatic entries in the historical field book of Mason and Dixon and
illustrates the process of authoring historical narratives.16 Cherrycoke and his audience thus
mirror Pynchon and the heterogeneous array of readers of Mason & Dixon.

15 Cherrycoke says for example that he is “long accustomed to finding beauty only among the soiled and fallen”
(355).
16 A transcription of this journal can be found in Charles Clerc’s Mason & Dixon & Pynchon (153-229).
It is, however, not only Cherrycoke’s audience that is representative of readers of the Nineties but also Mason and Dixon themselves. They are, quite literally, critics in the wilderness and are perhaps the closest Pynchon gets to portraying literary critics. They reflect the reading zeitgeist of the Nineties not only in that Mason’s suspicions about their crew—“Suppose but one of them is a French Agent … perhaps even bent upon our Dissolution” (Pynchon, *MD* 453)—can be seen as a humorous take on the animosity towards French theory during the Eighties and Nineties, but also in that they defy any clear categorization.

Like literary critics, they are both readers and writers: Dixon as surveyor reads the landscape and his instruments; Mason, the astronomer, reads the stars. Together, they “write” the line onto the land. If the line is the outcome of their reading, much like essays or books are the outcome of an academic reader’s encounter with a text, it is clear that it is the product of a hybridized reading, the joint effort of a surveyor and an astronomer. Mason, Dixon and their crew draw indeed from a “supermarket of ideas” (astronomy, geometry, surveying, geomancy, feng shui, and Telluric and magnetic readings). This is underscored by the fact that Mason and Dixon exhibit characteristics of several of the paradigmatic readers I have discussed thus far. One can, in fact, discover in them features of the paranoid, doubtful, hopeful, and resisting reader.

As their effort to map and conquer the wilderness, to bring, in Enlightenment fashion, light into the dark, recalls the paranoid reader’s attempt to unmask, demystify, and clarify, it is not unexpected when both Mason and Dixon exhibit traits of that kind of reader. Mason believes that the stars and their movements hold “a cryptick Message” (Pynchon, *MD* 59), translates a message received from a French war ship on their first voyage into “Plain Text” (Pynchon, *MD* 247), and suspects, like Stencil and Oedipa, plots against him and Dixon. His conviction that
“They who control the Microscopick, control the World” (663) brings to mind Barthes’s insistence in “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives” that even the smallest unit of a text “signifies” and has to be accounted for. A conversation between Mason and Dixon in Chapter 49 of the novel also shows Mason as a believer in methods that sound particularly “paranoid”:

Suppose a secret force of Jesuits, receives each Day a summary of Observations made at Greenwich, and transcalculates it according to a system known to the Kabbalists of the Second Century as Gematria, whereby Messages may be extracted from lines of Text sacred and otherwise … The Dispute of Bradley’s Obs, then, as over Falmsteed’s before him, would ever keep as their unspoken intention that the Numbers nocturnally obtain’d be set side by side, and arrang’d into Lines, like those of a text, manipulated till a Message be reveal’d. (479)

Considering Mason imagines scenarios such as this, it is no wonder that Cherrycoke lets us know that “‘Star-Gazing’ … was a young man’s term for masturbating” (Pynchon, MD 171). Mason’s paranoid moments are thus explicitly linked with Gravity’s Rainbow’s assessment of the activity of the paranoid reader.17

Mason is, however, not a classical paranoid reader as Stencil or Oedipa. When he tells Dixon that “when ‘tis all done I shall only return to Sapperton, no wiser, and not know if any of this ‘happen’d,’ or if I merely dream’d it” (Pynchon, MD 610), he echoes Benny Profane’s “offhand I’d say I haven’t learned a goddamn thing” (Pynchon, V. 491) and the doubtful reader’s conviction of the impossibility of gaining mastery over a text. Dixon, whose belief in Hollow Earth theories shows perhaps a paranoid search for meaning behind the apparent, similarly moves away from the paranoid reader. The attempt to reduce uncertainties and control meaning

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17 See Chapter 4, pp. 79-80 of this dissertation.
evident in Mason’s notion of the “microscopick” is echoed in Dixon’s feeling uneasy about “spaces not yet enclos’d” (Pynchon, MD 241). As a surveyor, then, he encloses “that which had hitherto been without Form” (Pynchon, MD 504). The notion of giving form to something that has no form certainly recalls the narrator’s remark in Gravity’s Rainbow that “We are obsessed with building labyrinths, where before there was open plain and sky” (268) and can be read as expressing the belief shared by the doubtful readers and the reader-response critics that that there is no meaning in the text itself and that only our reading gives a text form.

While the interruptions and comments on Cherrycoke’s narrative by the various members of the LeSpark family certainly constitute the most obvious and sustained representation of the resisting stance described in the previous chapter, Mason and Dixon take on a role that mimics Cherrycoke’s audience when Armand, the chef who cooks for their crew, tells a story about a mechanical duck that supposedly follows him. The parenthetical injections—“the Frenchman goes on” or “Armand continues” (Pynchon, MD 371, 373)—repeat a pattern used in Cherrycoke’s narrative and Mason and Dixon take on the role of the LeSparks by interrupting, commenting on, or questioning the story (Pynchon, MD 371, 372, 376), similar to Prairie in Vineland.

Rather than sticking to one method of reading or progressing from paranoid to doubtful to resisting stances, Mason and Dixon go back and forth between the various paradigms I have been describing and thus illustrate an approach to reading that recalls Leitch’s suggestion in Living with Theory: they “assemble and apply various tactics as situations require” (46). If we consider their progress through the wilderness as an allegory of the endeavor of literary critics, their work has been successful: they made it through the text, subjected it to a variety of methods, and produced their response to it. However, while the line represents an actual outcome of their
reading, there is still a sense of “Incompletion,—fail’d Arrivals, Departures too soon” (Pynchon, \textit{MD} 692) at the end of the novel. Similarly, Mason’s dream at the very end of the novel also shows the failure of reading:

[He sees] ascending before him one single dark extended Petroglyph,—a Town-enclosed Hill-side, upon which lie the all-but-undamag’d remains of an ancient City, late Roman or early Italian temples and public buildings in taupes and browns, Lombardy Poplars of Green very dark…. There is writing on some of the Structures, but Mason cannot read it. Does not yet know it is writing. Perhaps when Night has fallen, he will be able to look up, to question the Sky. (771)

e. \textit{Mason & Dixon}’s “Zone”

We could interpret this as a vision of John Winthrop’s “City Upon a Hill” representing all of America. Mason’s dream, accordingly, is about trying to “read” this strange continent. The dream then reiterates an important notion: Mason and Dixon are readers of a text called America. We can therefore establish an analogy between Mason and Dixon’s 1760s setting and the Zone in \textit{Gravity’s Rainbow} or the “Noir Center” in \textit{Vineland}. I have described the Zone and the Noir Center both as extended metaphors for the reading environment of the 1970s and 1980s, respectively, and as a mirror of the reader’s experience of the novels themselves. \textit{Mason & Dixon}’s America works in the same way: not only does it function as a text that is read by both Mason and Dixon and the readers of the novel, it also echoes the theory mess of the Nineties.\footnote{Both Tony Tanner (\textit{Mystery} 235) and Brian McHale (46) have compared \textit{Mason & Dixon}’s 1760s America to \textit{Gravity’s Rainbow}’s Zone. No critics have, however, made the connection between \textit{Mason & Dixon} and the concurrent theory mess.}

The notion of America as a text is explicitly expressed in two scenes: the first is Dixon’s encounter with a group of Kabbalists in a tavern west of the Susquehanna River. They tell him
that America “was ever a secret Body of Knowledge,— meant to be studied with the same
dedication as the Hebrew Kabbala would demand” (Pynchon, MD 487). It becomes even more
poignant as they continue: “Forms of the Land, the flow of water, the occurrence of what us’d to
be call’d Miracles, all are Text,— to be attended to, manipulated, read, remember’d” (487). The
second scene occurs after Mason and Dixon visit an underground cavern in Chapter 51.
Impressed by the cave, Mason has a moment of epiphany and exclaims, “Text,— … it is Text,—
and we are its readers and its Pages are the Days turning. Unscrolling, as a Pilgrim’s Itinerary
map in ancient Days. And this is the Chapter call’d ‘The Subterranean Cathedral, or, The Lesson
Grasp’d’” (Pynchon, MD 498). As readers of this text, Mason and Dixon apply a variety of
methods to master it. Their reading is an attempt to conquer the wilderness, to bring light into the
darkness, and to demystify the “enigmatick Area[s]” (Pynchon, MD 467) of the New World. The
drawing of the line onto America, then, is to impose a distinct interpretation or a definite
meaning on the text. They “mark the Earth,” as Pynchon’s fictional Joel Barlow-like poet
Timothy Tox puts it, “with geometrick Scars” (Pynchon, MD 257). This certainly echoes
Barthes’s aforementioned description of literary commentary in S/Z: “the work of the
commentary … consists precisely in manhandling the text, interrupting it” (15).19 The scars
Mason and Dixon leave on the landscape thus correspond to the scars readers leave on a text. As
the various interests and expectations of readers, both in the novel and in literary interpretation in
general, leave different kinds of such scars, both Mason & Dixon’s America and any text being
interpreted are thus marked by “a great disorderly Tangle of Lines” (Pynchon, MD 349).

This disorderly tangle of different interests and interpretations is made clear in one
character’s description of the American provinces in Chapter 60: “There is a love of complexity.

19 Significantly, the slash in the title of S/Z constitutes a similar line and indicates the interruption or scarring of
Balzac’s “Sarrasine.”
here in America … pure Space waits the Surveyor,— no previous Lines, no fences, no streets to constrain polygony however extravagant,— especially in Maryland, where … all Sides [are] zigging and zagging, going ahead and doubling back, making Loops inside Loops” (Pynchon, *MD* 586). The fragmentation and dissension within *Mason & Dixon*’s America certainly recalls the situation in the 1990s academy. The “overproliferation of theoretical modes” and the “ideological and methodological factionalism” Rapaport decries in *The Theory Mess* thus find a clear analogy in the setting of *Mason & Dixon*. The lesson in Pennsylvania politics that Mason gets in a tavern in Philadelphia is quite representative for the bickering of various factions that can be found throughout the novel: “Religious bodies here cannot be distinguish’d from Political Factions. These are Quaker, Anglican, Presbyterian, German Pietist” (Pynchon, *MD* 293). Characterized by conflicts between and within these groups, Pennsylvania politics may be regarded, Mason is told, “as the greater American Question in Miniature” (Pynchon, *MD* 294).

The further west Mason and Dixon move, the “messier” it gets. They come across conflicting interests everywhere: Jesuits, Native Americans, “Establish’d Greed” (Pynchon, *MD* 457), local politicians, iron mill owners, the British king, and “Sects as numerous as Settlers” (Pynchon, *MD* 522) all have different designs. When Cherrycoke tells his stories to his relatives some twenty years later, the situation is not much different. During “Christmastide 1786,” three years after the end of the Revolutionary War, “the Nation [is] bickering itself into Fragments” (Pynchon, *MD* 6). Mason and Dixon’s encounter with the “numbing torrent of American Stimuli” (Pynchon, *MD* 496) thus mirrors reading in the theory mess and at the same time our encounter with the multiplicity of the text of *Mason & Dixon*. Simply put, their progress through the wilderness of America anticipates our progress through the novel.

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20 Cohen applies this to contemporary America (287) but fails to make the connection between his observation and the bickering and fragmentation in contemporary theory.
f. Reading *Mason & Dixon*

The laborious and exhausting work of applying “scientifick” methods, of cutting a vist through the woods, of climbing mountains, and of withstanding thunderstorms and snow allegorically describes the difficult task of making it through the book. The notion of reading as “work” came up in numerous initial reviews, whose authors either commented on *Mason & Dixon’s* density or openly admitted the lack of time and stamina to make it through the book. Paul Gray, for example, suspected that many readers would be put off by “the hard, head-scratching work that Pynchon’s uncompromising prose demands” (“Drawing” 98), and Walter Kirn confessed to having merely skimmed or even skipped almost half of the book (Clerc 32). A look at the first of two long and elaborate opening sentences reveals not only the novel’s density but also serves as a small scale example of our progress through the rest of the novel:

> Snow-Balls have flown their Arcs, starr’d the Sides of Outbuildings, as of Cousins, carried Hats away into the brisk Wind off Delaware,— the Sleds are brought in and their Runners carefully dried and greased, shoes deposited in the back Hall, a stocking’d-foot Descent made upon the great Kitchen, in a purposeful Dither since Morning, punctuated by the ringing Lids of various Boilers and Stewing-Pots, fragrant with Pie-Spices, peel’d Fruits, Suet, heated Sugar,— the Children, having all upon the Fly, among rhythmic slaps of Batter and Spoon, coax’d and stolen what they might, proceed, as upon each afternoon all this snowy Advent, to a comfortable Room at the rear of the House, years since given over to their carefree Assaults. (Pynchon, *MD* 5)

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21 In his article about the critical reception of *Mason & Dixon*, Douglas Keesey notes that many reviewers were either “overwhelmed by the novel’s complexities, or they reduce[d] it to a simplistic certainty” (169). For the notion of reading as work, see also the chapter “The Work of Reading” in Hartman’s *Criticism in the Wilderness* (161-88).
The “love of complexity” mentioned above is made explicitly clear on the level of syntax. Some readers may feel like Mr. Harland overhearing Mason and Dixon and perceiving “Words that sound like English but make no sense” (Pynchon, MD 332).

The antiquated spelling, punctuation, and word choice, as well as the meandering sentence structure, put us in a situation that resembles Mason and Dixon’s encounter with “ancient Magick” and wilderness in America. After clearing a path through the syntactical “Loops inside Loops” and the wilderness of words, the sentence becomes clearer. We may see an allusion to Gravity’s Rainbow in the arcs of the snowballs, may apply the end of the snowball fight to the end of the Cold War,\(^22\) and feel confident to continue our “work.” In this manner, readers—if they persist—make their way through the novel. As Mason and Dixon leave the “sober Day-Light” (Pynchon, MD 687) behind, readers should expect difficulties and obstacles along the way. It can be argued that the deeper Mason and Dixon delve into the back country, the more ambiguous the novel becomes for us. There are jumps in chronology, new plotlines, enigmatic passages, and mixtures of narrative frames. In Chapter 32, for example, we come across a character that Mason and Dixon do not meet until Chapter 42, Chapter 41 may be narrated by Cherrycoke or Mr. LeSpark, and Chapter 59 is a flashback to the story of Tom Hynes, who barely appears in the novel before or after. The most ambiguous part of the novel is made up of Chapters 53 and 54: without introduction, the text launches into a captivity narrative in which a woman named Eliza is captured by Native Americans and taken to a Jesuit College in Quebec. In Chapter 54 the narrative perspective turns from third-person into first-person and then shifts to Tenebrae and Ethelmer. We find out that Eliza’s story was an excerpt from a book that had been mentioned in Cherrycoke’s narrative several times before: The Ghastly Fop.

\(^{22}\) As one contributor has suggested on the Mason & Dixon edition of the Pynchon Wiki.
have been the narrative frame for the preceding chapter. In the course of next several pages, the story of Eliza (perhaps read by Ethelmer) intersects with the story of Mason and Dixon, and the narrative switches back to Cherrycoke. Our encounter with the text here directly corresponds to the “zigging and zagging” and the “going ahead and doubling back” which Mason and Dixon come upon in the provinces. Their encounter with the unknown and, sometimes, unknowable is therefore mirrored in these two chapters, which, as David Cowart has argued “militate against one’s desire for a readerly, unambiguous narrative” (“Luddite” 375).

As in similar passages I have described in the preceding chapters, there are several instances in *Mason & Dixon* when the text seems to directly speak to its readers. Mason and Dixon’s feeling upon completing the visto—that there is “some Engine whose higher Assembly and indeed Purpose, they are never, except from infrequent Glimpses, quite able to make out” (Pynchon, *MD* 683)—may reflect some readers’ feeling after finishing the novel. As we try to make sense of what we have read, we may be plagued by the feeling that we did not quite get the actual point—similar to Dixon on his trip south in Chapter 39. Returning from his visit to Williamsburg, Virginia, Dixon tries to make “some kind of sense … of what has otherwise been a pointless Trip” (397). Dixon was blind, Cherrycoke points out, to slavery “tho’ Slaves pass’d before his Sight” (Pynchon, *MD* 398). His trip, we read, “was all about something else, not Calverts, Jesuits, Penns, nor Chinese” (Pynchon, *MD* 398). We are reminded, then, that whatever we read into the novel, it may also be all about something else. It is therefore not only in its endless references to ghosts and the invisible\(^23\) that *Mason & Dixon* remind us of the fact that there may be something we have, like Dixon, not seen. Again and again, Cherrycoke tells his audience that there are different versions and interpretations to stories and history. Chapter 35, for example, starts with an excerpt from Cherrycoke’s book on “Christ and History,” in which he

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\(^{23}\) There are over forty references to ghosts in *Mason & Dixon* and even more to the invisible.
claims that “Facts are but the Play-things of lawyers” and that “History is not Chronology.”

History’s practitioners, writes Cherrycoke, “must continue more than one life-line back into a Past … a great disorderly Tangle of Lines, long and short, weak and strong” (Pynchon, MD 349).

In the ensuing discussion, Ethelmer takes up a meta-historical stance claiming that “History is hir’d, or coerc’d, only in Interests that must ever prove base.” When he starts pointing out that there may be more than one version of history, he is interrupted by his Uncle Ives, who holds the opinion that “No one has time, for more than one Version of the Truth” (Pynchon, MD 350).

While there have certainly been real-life versions of Uncle Ives among the readers of Mason & Dixon who have grown impatient with Pynchon’s “version of truth” and put the book down,24 Cherrycoke’s narrative repeatedly illustrates and supports the notion of the coexistence of several versions of truth or history. Readers are reminded of this coexistence, for example, in Dixon’s story of the Lambton Worm (594), in the tale of the Chinese astronomers Hsi and Ho (628), in Mason’s decision not to join Dixon for another observation of the transit of Venus (717-18), in Mason’s official field book and its foul copy (408), and in the discussion between Mason and Maskelyne about what will go into the official report (726).

In its reminding us of the possibility of having overlooked important aspects and its insistence on the possibility of different explanations not only in literature but also in historiography (perhaps itself merely another literary genre), Mason & Dixon draws our attention to questions of literary interpretation. Any consideration of reader-character parallels must address Mason and Dixon’s realization in Chapter 72 that their line has been something negative:

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24 One need only think of the above mentioned review by Kirn or take a look at some of the negative customer reviews on Amazon.com.
back in Philadelphia and about to return to England, just having escaped enraged slave owners in Maryland and discussing slavery, the “Mysteries of the Magnetick” (Pynchon, MD 700), and the deaths on the visto, they come to “understand that the Line is exactly what Capt. Zhang and a number of others have been styling at all along—a conduit for Evil” (Pynchon, MD 701). I have mentioned earlier the notion of Mason and Dixon’s line as a scar on a text. It should become clear to us that as readers we impose a similar line on the text of *Mason & Dixon* with our interpretation. Dixon’s fear of open spaces anticipates our own aversion to ambiguity and uncertainty. Like a surveyor, we enclose a text. We decide on our version and risk ignoring the “untold others” (Pynchon, *MD* 760). This can, of course, be applied to the reading of any text and the endeavor of critical reading in general. Since Mason and Dixon’s progress through the wilderness is such a literal embodiment of Hartman’s book title, it is adequate to recall here Hartman’s comparison of literary criticism with the detective novel: “confronted by a bewildering text, it acts out a solution trying various defenses, various interpretations, then pretending it has come to an authoritative stance—when, in truth, it has simply purged itself of complexities never fully mastered” (*Wilderness* 22). What Cohen, in his article on the ampersand in *Mason & Dixon*’s title, has described as “the Enlightenment reduction of possibility” (273) can therefore be transferred to critical reading: as soon as we read a text (and write about it), we draw a line on the text, and thus reduce its possibilities. What then does *Mason & Dixon* say about literary interpretation? That it is a “conduit for evil” as well? Does the novel amount to an argument against theory and a yearning for “ancient Magick” (Pynchon, *MD* 487) or for a

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25 After Dixon “place[d] his Fist in the way of the oncoming Face” of slave driver (Pynchon, *MD* 698).
26 This brings to mind Iser’s argument in *The Implied Reader* that I have mentioned in Chapter 4: “If we cannot find (or impose) … consistency, sooner or later we will put the text down” (285).
27 See also Dixon’s trip to Norway and further north: He tells Mason a story about his excursion into the Hollow Earth, where “Gnomes, Elves, small folk” (740) live. Here is all the magic, superstition, and possibility the Enlightenment has pushed back. Dixon is told that “Once the solar parallax is known … once the necessary Degrees
Vendleresque “innocence before the text”? Are we perhaps, as Bernard Duyfhuizen suggests, “better off getting lost in [Mason & Dixon’s] wilderness of narrators and voices than trying to carve a straight Visto through its thicket of words” (140)?

g. Becoming a Meta-Reader

Rather than amounting to an argument against theory, I believe Mason & Dixon mixes the doubtful reader’s sense of unreadability with the pluralism and meta-awareness of the Nineties. The notion that interpretation leaves a scar on a given text and Duyfhuizen’s suggestion to give up the attempt to carve a straight line through the novel certainly recall not only J. Hillis Miller’s notion of unreadable texts in the sense that they resist a single definite interpretation or mastery over the work but also V.’s or Gravity’s Rainbow’s openness and ambiguity and the embracing of undecidability proposed by doubtful readers. We are thus once again reminded that trying to enclose or master a text means to Stencilize, or, in this case, Mason-and-Dixonize it. Instead of condemning the attempt to draw a line or expressing a deconstructive notion of the endless deferral of meaning, however, the novel promotes what I have called meta-reading. This stance not only constitutes a way to avoid “diminishing readings” but also prompts readers, in Rapaport’s words, “to study and adjudicate what has occurred” (157).

Let us take a quick look at “Dixon’s dilemma.” His discomfort with unenclosed spaces generates the counter-move of surveying and drawing lines. Ultimately, however, he comes to believe that his and Mason’s work on the line through the American wilderness was something negative. If, as I have argued, Dixon’s dilemma reflects readers’ need for clarity and definite meaning and, at the same time, the feeling of “diminishing” a text with any interpretation, the are measur’d, and the size and weight and shape of the Earth are calculated inescapably at last, all this will vanish” (741).
advice of Dixon’s teacher Emerson offers a way out not only for Dixon but also for readers in
general:

If it’s but the empty places between the Towns … your worries are at an end, for
look what you can do. *You can get above it.* … Earthbound, … we are limited to
our Horizon, which sometimes is to be measur’d but in inches. — … Yet aloft, in
Map-space, origins, destinations, any Termi, hardly seem to matter, — one can
apprehend all at once the entire plexity of possible journeys, set as one is above
Distance, above Time itself. (Pynchon, *MD* 504-5)

Instead of getting lost in the wilderness, instead of reducing the possibilities, this suggests an
awareness of interconnection and possibility. This comes close to Kolodny’s advocating of
pluralism in her aforementioned article “Dancing through the Minefield.” For Kolodny,
pluralism brings with it both the notion of inexhaustible readings and a meta-awareness of theory
that avoids the entrapments of a fixed methodology: “reading is a highly socialized—or
learned—activity. What makes it so exciting, of course, is that it can be constantly relearned and
refined, so as to provide either an individual or an entire reading community, over time, with
infinite variations of the same text” (104).

One could of course argue that such pluralism has been a strong contributor to the messy
state of theory in the Nineties. On the other hand, Kolodny offers a view that takes an outside, or,
in staying true to Emerson’s advice to Dixon, “above” perspective, which also recalls the scene
from *Against the Day* I have mentioned in the introduction. The advice to take a step back from
the railroad map in order to see “how the different lines connect, how they do not, where varying
interests may want them to connect” (Pynchon, *AtD* 689), echoes not only the words of Dixon’s
teacher but also Kolodny’s insistence that the reexamination of texts with new methods means
that these methods themselves must be scrutinized. She writes, “since the grounds upon which we assign aesthetic value to texts are never infallible, unchangeable, or universal, we must reexamine not only our aesthetics but, as well, the inherent biases and assumptions informing the critical methods which (in part) shape our aesthetic responses” (102). The awareness that “the choices we make in the present inevitably alter our sense of the past that led to them” (103) thus leads Kolodny to “[call] into question that recurrent tendency in criticism to establish norms for the evaluation of literary works when we might better serve the cause of literature by developing standards for evaluating the adequacy of our critical methods” (107).

The call to take a step back and reevaluate our own assumptions, methods, and cultural entanglement, can certainly be applied both to reading and the theory mess. Mason & Dixon’s preoccupation with historiography and the meta-historical stance of Cherrycoke and Ethelmer underscore the importance of Emerson’s advice to Dixon. Following Dixon into “Map-space” reveals not only what New Historicist Louis A. Montrose has called “the social embedment … of all modes of writing” (20) but may also make possible a stance above the entrenched camps involved in the ideological battles of the theory mess. Here, then, the connection with Hayden White’s meta-historical stance becomes clear. An awareness of the modes of emplotment, the modes of explanation, and the ideological position of the historiographer and establishing a typology of interpretive patterns in historiography (aesthetic, epistemological, and ethical), White writes in *The Tropics of Discourse*, “might permit us to mediate between contending ideologues, each of whom regards his own position as scientific and that of his opponent as mere ideology or ‘false consciousness’” (22).28 The notion of taking a step back, of meta-awareness,

28 The provision of a plot structure follows literary conventions, argues White (59), and therefore can be reduced to romance, tragedy, comedy, or satire. The attempt to explain historical events may be divided into ideographic, contextual, organicist, or mechanist accounts (64-66). Finally, the ideological position is either liberal, conservative, radical, or anarchist (68).
mediation, and connection, is also visible in Cohen’s interpretation of the ampersand in the title of *Mason & Dixon* as an indicator of the novel’s being “a book about the possibility of connection, relation, simultaneity, about possibility itself” (278). This, then, can be applied both to reading itself and to the theory mess. If we adopt a meta-awareness and fly, with Dixon, above map-space, we may overcome the local and entrenched, and acknowledge possibilities, continuities, and the “great disorderly Tangle of Lines” (Pynchon, *MD* 348) of reading itself.

h. Outlook: Meinel in Map-space

It is time for a quick ascent into map-space and a meta-comment about my organization into chapters that have more or less corresponded to the postwar decades. We do not need to be reminded that, as William H. Young and Nancy K. Young put it, “events to not always fall neatly into ten-year segments” (xi). With the years 1945, 1963, 1973, 1980, and 1991, I have chosen symbolic dates that indicated either the end of an era or the beginning of something new. From a historical and political point of view, it would therefore certainly have made sense to let this chapter end in 2001 and muse on the effects of September 11 on the academy and perhaps also on its reading practices. I chose not to for two reasons: first, even a quick glance at, for example, the MLA’s *Profession 2009*, in which David Steiner, Mark Edmundson, Gerald Graff, and others discuss issues of reading, the use of theory, and the right way to teach reading, shows that the debates about theory, aesthetics, and methodology have not just disappeared. The Theory Mess and the arguments that go with it are still there. Second, in terms of reading, there have been developments that loomed much larger in discussions of reading. I have described the Nineties as the culmination of various forces that had been gathering in the Eighties. One could, however, also consider the Nineties as a radical break with the decades before. The fall of the
USSR and the video-game aesthetics of the Gulf War news coverage at the beginning of the decade marked the advent of a decidedly new political and cultural environment, and the arrival of the World Wide Web, along with the developments in computer technology, has created an entirely new set of reading anxieties.
CONCLUSION
THE END OF READING AS WE KNOW IT?

a. A Brave New World

It is interesting to speculate which date or year future historians will choose to depict the beginning of the digital age. Will it be the Advanced Research Projects Agency’s ARPANET or the development of the Hypertext Editing System at Brown University in the Sixties? The introduction of Intel’s 4004 microprocessor or of the Apple I in the Seventies? Tim Berners-Lee’s work on the World Wide Web in the late Eighties? Or will it be the internet’s becoming widely accessible in the Nineties? The Nineties are a good bet as they offer multiple symbolic events: apart from the introduction of the World Wide Web early in the decade, computers outsold television sets for the first time in 1996 (T. McConnell 95), IBM’s Deep Blue defeated chess world champion Gary Kasparov in 1997, and in 1998 Microsoft passed General Electric as the biggest US company (T. McConnell 97). The growth of the internet alone illustrates how much of a revolution has occurred: after the launching of the World Wide Web and the release of the Mosaic browser, the content of the Web grew 341,000% between 1992 and 1993 (T. McConnell 524). Between 1994 and 1998, the traffic on the internet doubled every one hundred days leading to sixty-two million American users by 1998 (T. McConnell 352). Two surveys conducted by Wired magazine in 1997 and 2000 showed that the public increasingly embraced
new communication technology (including beepers, cell phones, and laptop computers) and that more and more Americans had turned into “Digital Citizens.”

What do society’s embrace of digital technology and the increasing digitalization of information and the means of transmission of semiotic signals mean for reading? Are we in the midst of a reading revolution? These questions have been at the core of numerous debates that have constituted a new, and perhaps more urgent, phase in the Culture Wars and Theory Wars. When computers outsold television sets, a new opponent entered the ring, and discussions about television, political correctness, and multiculturalism were soon overshadowed by anxious questions about the future of both academic and popular reading. At a Yale conference entitled “Beyond Gutenberg: Hypertext and the Future of the Humanities” or in books like Geoffrey Nunberg’s *The Future of the Book*, literary scholars, new media critics, and historians have tried to imagine the impact of the technological advances upon reading. What most scholars agree on is (a) that the beginning of the digital age is, in Jay David Bolter’s words, “a watershed as important as the shift from manuscript to print in the fifteenth century” (20), and (b) that these developments are unavoidable. Nicholas Negroponte, for example, predicted that “[t]he change from atoms to bits is irrevocable and unstoppable” (4) and Sadie Plant imagined that there would be “devastating changes wrought by the digitization of information” (207). If, as Littau has argued, “the materiality in which writing comes to us … is an important factor in shaping our relation to the written word” (14), and if the digitalization of text constitutes a radical new form of such textual materiality, are our reading habits and practices being transformed right in front

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1 For more on these surveys, see T. McConnell 528.
2 By “atoms” Negroponte means the storage of information on physical objects, such as CDs, books, or videotapes; “bits” refers to digital storage and digital exchange of information. It could be argued, however, that digital is still atomic.
of our eyes? Many scholars believe that there is indeed a reading revolution in progress—an that is comparable to the momentous changes in the wake of the introduction of Gutenberg’s movable press.

Especially in the early years, these accounts often amounted to either a wholesale acceptance of the new technologies or to a fin de millenaire panic about the passing of the book. Negroponte’s gung-ho Being Digital and Sven Birkert’s plaintive The Gutenberg Elegies roughly cover the range of reactions. Reading, once again, became an issue that had deeper implications. For some, the reading of books became an act symbolically opposed to either mainstream society or to the new technology: the reader as Luddite. For others, reading hypertext fiction had iconoclastic implications: we are finally freed from the restraints of the printed page and are finally able to do away with books.

b. Alarmism: the Death of the Book and Luddite Readers

If part of the cultural anxieties among both neoconservatives and liberals during the 1980s had to do with the all-pervading influence of television, these fears were now transferred to the new technology. Critics who had been concerned about deculturated readers, declining educational standards, and television saw in hypertext and computer screens an even more terrifying opponent than television. The fear that books were on the way out and that hypermedia would lure people away from reading books has sparked new debates in both the popular and the academic arenas. Predictions like George P. Landow’s in 1992 that books may still be used at the

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3 See for example Cavallo and Chartier 26, Chartier 5, Littau 33, Landow, Hypertext 19, or Bolter 20.
4 An interesting contribution to this topic is Kathleen Fitzgerald’s The Anxiety of Obsolescence. Fitzgerald argues that the perception of the imminent death of literature has important implications. Portraying themselves as an endangered species, her argument goes, has helped white male authors to maintain their hegemonic position.
5 How concerns about television turned into concerns about computers can also be seen in Jane Healy’s Endangered Minds. Why Children Don’t Think and What We Can Do About It (1990) and Failure to Connect. How Computers Affect Our Children’s Minds (1998).
moment but “will gradually lose the primary role in humanistic scholarship” (*Hypertext* 23)\(^6\) or Bolter’s that “[t]he loss of the great text as a touchstone and of the great author as authority is real and unavoidable” (37), along with essay titles such as Robert Coover’s “The End of Books,”\(^7\) caused much apprehension among writers and scholars alike. Add to that the notion that, as Patrick Brantlinger argued in his 2001 book *Who Killed Shakespeare?*, “English is being marginalized, along with the other humanities disciplines” (1) and it becomes clear that we have reached a reinvigoration of the Culture Wars. In many ways we come across familiar concerns here. There are echoes of 1950s anxieties about mass culture, of 1980s arguments about television and declining education, and of the Curriculum Wars and Theory Wars. Although the adversary was new, the “Reading Wars” (Birkerts 3, 32)—the debates about computers, digital literature, and the death of the book—were merely another re-packaging of an old debate.

At one end of the debate were alarmist accounts which considered computers and the perceived threat to books as key factors to what they saw as an acceleration in societal decline. Just as Franzen talks about oppositional reading, these Luddite\(^8\) readers understand reading as a political act and as a deliberately oppositional exercise: anachronistic, slow, linear, private in an increasingly exhibitionistic society,\(^9\) intellectual, anti-technological, and “elegiac” (Birkerts 6).

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\(^6\) In his article “Twenty Minutes into the Future,” Landow argues that many students “have already found themselves somewhere beyond the book as solacing object and cultural paradigm” (211).

\(^7\) Coover, however, neither proclaims nor encourages the end of books in his article. It merely is an introduction to the concept of hypertext and hypertext fiction.

\(^8\) Luddism can, of course, be defined in several ways: there is the historical movement in the early 1800s in opposition to the Industrial Revolution; there are Pynchon’s own thoughts on the topic in his article “Is it O.K. to be a Luddite?,” in which he argues that we need Luddite figures like Frankenstein’s monster or King Kong in order to cope with our surroundings: “When times are hard, and we feel at the mercy of forces many times more powerful, don’t we, in seeking some equalizer, turn, if only in imagination, in wish, to the Badass—the djinn, the golem, the hulk, the superhero—who will resist what will otherwise overwhelm us?” (40); there is Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, who mailed over a dozen homemade bombs around the country between 1978 and 1995 in order to call attention to the destabilizing effects of technology on human freedom and traditional values; and there is—much more harmless—Birkerts, who calls himself a Luddite (4) because he is opposed to the developments of the electronic age. Note also that C.P. Snow called intellectuals “natural Luddites” in *The Two Cultures* (par. 128).

\(^9\) Birkerts notes: “The doors and walls of our habitations matter less and less—the world sweeps through the wires as it needs to, or as we need it to. The monitor light is always blinking; we are always potentially on-line” (130).
These readers are neither as radical as the historical Luddites or Ted Kaczynski, nor are they “badass” in Pynchon’s sense (see Footnote 8). They are Luddites in so far as they are in opposition to the technological innovations around them. They resist non-linear reading, hypertext fiction, electronic texts, and other technological advances of the digital age, which they perceive as a threat to either print culture or reading in general. To varying degrees, they long for a pre-computer age. While none of them sends bombs in the mail or destroys computers, it is the old-fashioned exercise of reading a book that becomes the symbolic Luddite act.

Let us examine Birkets’s The Gutenberg Elegies as pars pro toto. Parts of his book call to mind Bloom’s Closing of the American Mind: when Birkerts complains, for example, that “our educational systems are in decline; that our students are less and less able to read and comprehend their required texts” (123), it sounds like a sentence taken straight out of any of the Culture War classics. What is new to Birkerts’s text, however, is the melancholic (and sometimes alarmist) tone. He perceives the act of reading a serious printed-on-actual-paper book as an activity belonging to an age inevitably slipping away: “We are living in a society and culture that is in dissolution” (20). Since there are, as he believes, “fewer and fewer readers for serious works” (28), he is afraid that “the old act of slowly reading a serious book becomes and elegiac exercise” (6). Just as in Bloom, Kernan, or D’Souza, we find in The Gutenberg Elegies also the notion that deconstruction and the usual poststructural suspects are somehow to blame for cultural decline:

The decline of the prestige of authorship—something all writers feel and lament—has much to do with the climate of our current intellectual culture, a

Similarly Batchelor speaks about an “always on” or “me-centric” society (xi), in which “self-promotion is essential” (125).
climate in which all manifestations of author-ity are seen as suspect.

Deconstruction and multiculturalism advance arm in arm, the former bent upon undermining the ideological base upon which aesthetic and cultural hierarchies have been erected, the latter proposing a lateral and egalitarian renovation of the canon. (Birkerts 158-59)

The literary theory accompanying the dawning of the digital age is, in Birkerts’s view, an inevitable expression of the zeitgeist, the intellectual equivalent to “the fragmentation and collapse of formerly coherent systems” (187-88).

Birkerts, however, also finds himself in a radically new environment. Unlike Bloom and others, who only had to worry about educational decline, the negative influence of theory or liberalism, and various “deaths” (of the author, of literature, of serious readers), Birkerts is faced with new adversaries on top of all that: computers, the internet, and digital citizens. To be fair, he is not entirely negative. Among the “gains of electronic postmodernity,” he lists, for example, “a global perspective that admits the extraordinary complexity of interrelations” and “a relativistic comprehension of situations that promotes the erosion of old biases” (27). The gains, however, do not make up for what Birkerts perceives as the losses. What gives his account an air of, in Franzen’s words, “raging alarmism” (173), is the fear that these processes are irrevocable:

In the loss column … are (a) a fragmented sense of time and a loss of the so-called duration experience, that depth phenomenon we associate with reverie; (b) a reduced attention span and a general impatience with sustained inquiry; (c) a shattered faith in institutions and in the explanatory narratives that formerly gave shape to subjective experience; (d) a divorce from the past, from a vital sense of history as a cumulative or organic process; (e) an estrangement from geographic
place and community; and (f) an absence of any strong vision of a personal or collective future. (Birkerts 27)

c. Iconoclasts: Hooray for Hypertext!

On the other end of the spectrum have been those who embrace the digital revolution and who hope to move beyond the printed page. Far from mourning the passing of the book, these theorists have been enthusiastic about the possibilities of digital texts and virtual reality and have rallied against the book as a fetish or an untouchable icon. Because of this challenging of the printed book as an icon, I call them iconoclast readers. The iconoclasts have argued for either the replacement of what they consider an antiquated technology or for a technology that would liberate readers from the restraints of the printed page. One of the first examples for new ways of thinking about literacy and reading in the digital age was Landow’s widely read *Hypertext* in 1992. In it, Landow applied deconstructionist lingo to the developments of the market and, as the subtitle of his book (*The Convergence of Critical Theory and Technology*) suggests, connected his observations about hypertext with critical theory—most prominently concepts of Barthes and Derrida. Another good example for a wholesale acceptance of the new technologies is Negroponte’s *Being Digital*. The fact that he opened his book with the remark, “Being dyslexic, I don’t like to read” (3), illustrates how wide the chasm between the bibliophile mourners of the old and the iconoclasts could be.

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10 In analogy to liberation theology, Paul Duguid speaks of “liberation technology” (73-77). He is, however, quite skeptical about the claims of Landow and others, noting, “The desire for a technology to liberate information from technology is not far from the search for a weapon to end all weapons or the war to end all wars” (76).
Naturally, in the pre-internet or early internet days few people were familiar with hypertext fiction, with the Storyspace software (developed by Bolter, John B. Smith, and Michael Joyce in 1990), or with Ted Nelson’s idea of hypertext as “a series of text chunks connected by links which offer the reader different pathways” (qtd. in Landow, *Hypertext* 4). Most early accounts therefore usually familiarized readers with the concepts and the terminology while also engaging in a good amount of speculation. From today’s perspective, some of Landow’s, Bolter’s, or Negroponte’s claims sound like science fiction, and it is not always clear whether they are writing about digital word processing, hypertext fiction, hypertext in general, or all mixed together. Voices like Nunberg’s, who warns in the introduction to *The Future of the Book* that “technology itself is changing so rapidly and unpredictably that even those who tend to think of it deterministically should have severe qualms about trying to predict what form it will wind up taking or what its cultural consequences are likely to be” (11), went mostly unheard in the midst of all the excitement and enthusiasm.

There are three points that are common to most of the texts of these iconoclast readers: the notion of liberation through technology, the notion of readers as writers, and the connecting of their observations with critical (often poststructuralist) theory. Early on in his article “Opening Hypertext: A Memoir,” for example, Ted Nelson emphatically reminded his readers that “THE PURPOSE OF COMPUTERS IS HUMAN FREEDOM” (44). This war cry of liberation has been echoed by many other iconoclast readers. For them, freedom through computers or hypertext does not only

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11 A good introduction to the varieties of electronic literature and hypertext fiction is the first chapter of N. Kathryn Hayles’s *Electronic Literature* (1-42).
12 Robert Coover’s introduction to the topic is a good example for a kind of respectful mystifying of computers. When Coover writes about “the humming digitalized precincts of avant-garde computer hackers, cyberpunks and hyperspace freaks” (par. 1), he refers to a place of the Other, half futuristic, half already there.
mean a “revolution in access to ideas” (Nelson 51) but also has to do with the coexistence of a multiplicity of voices. Coover, for example, noted that “hypertext presents a radically divergent technology, interactive and polyvocal, favoring a plurality of discourses over definitive utterance and freeing the reader from domination by the author” (par. 4). Coover’s last point is of particular interest here. An often discussed image in hypertext theory is the reader making his or her own way through the text—free from the “constraint of the page” (Bolter 20) or “the tyranny of the line” (Coover par. 3). Instead of linearity, hypertext allows multiple reading paths, and individual choices or preferences shape a new kind of reading. This is where many iconoclast readers have seen the revolutionary potential of hypertext. Landow, for example, has argued that hypertext “calls into question ideas of plot and story current since Aristotle” because it “challenges narrative and all literary form based on linearity” (Hypertext 101). Discussing Landow and Plant in Theories of Reading, Littau nicely sums up this notion of liberation through non-linearity:

the suggestion is that a linear medium such as print cannot represent the complex synergetic operations by which the brain as a massively parallel neural net, processes data. Or, to put this the other way around, the implication is that print, a medium which promotes linearity, has straight-jacketed us into a mode of linear thinking that was unthinkable in a pre-Gutenberg oral culture. (57)

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13 See also Negroponte, who believes that the digital age will lead to “decentralizing, globalizing, harmonizing, and empowering” (229) and that it “will remove the limitations of geography” (165). Similarly, Landow speaks of the “democratizing potential of the new information technology” (Hypertext 3.0 51).

14 Landow argues that “hypertext does not permit a tyrannical, univocal voice” and alludes to Bakhtin’s notion of the novel as dialogic, multivocal, and polyphonic (Hypertext 11).

15 In her article “The Virtual Complexity of Culture,” Plant argues that hypertext and cultural studies best tackle the “vast interconnectivity” of ideas (211).
Here the iconoclastic nature of these theorists becomes obvious: only if we move beyond the book, beyond the restraining print technology, will we be truly free as readers.\footnote{Interestingly, such thinking complicates the iconoclasts’ position. The notion that print technology has taken away something of a former non-linear thinking is technically a conservative position.}

Because of the participatory nature of hypertext, which allows readers to choose their own path through a text, Bolter has argued that “reader and author share in the act of making the text and therefore in the responsibility for the result” (31). Most of the hypertext theorists have seen this as a convergence of readers and writers. Coover, for example, considered them “fellow-travelers in the mapping and remapping of textual … components” (par. 4). This had several important consequences: first, it created a new kind of reader—empowered, active, “intrusive” (Landow \textit{Hypertext} 71), and “akin to a writer” (Littau 54). Second, this new hypertextual reader signaled to the iconoclast readers that the concept of authorship would also change. Plant, for example, predicted that the collapse of the distinction between “producers and consumers … [would] merely [be] the start of the devastating changes wrought by the digitization of information” (207). Lastly, the blurring of the lines between readers and writers was a literal translation of poststructuralist notions of writable texts. Landow, for example, remarked that “hypertext creates an almost embarrassingly literal embodiment of [Derrida’s emphasis on de-centering and Barthes’s conception of the readerly versus the writerly text]” (\textit{Hypertext} 34). Similarly, Bolter saw in hypertext “a vindication of postmodern literary theory” (24).

By aligning print technology with Barthes’s readerly text and electronic hypertext with writerly text (\textit{Hypertext} 5), Landow drew a clear line between the old and the new. Implicitly Landow took sides with the poststructuralists against their detractors and was able to portray himself and other hypertext enthusiasts as progressive, theory savvy, and innovative, while the opponent was implicitly exposed as hopelessly caught in a bygone age, backwards, and outdated.
A similar notion was made even more explicit in Bolter’s article “Literature in the Electronic Writing Space,” in which he analyzed the canon debates of the late Eighties and early Nineties in terms of print vs. hypertext technology: “Those who uphold the canon opt for a kind of authoritative writing and respectful reading that is appropriate to the technology of print” (37). On the other side stood “recent critical theory, which speaks of empowering the reader and breaking down the hierarchies of the traditional canon, [and which] is anticipating electronic text” (37). Barthes’s dichotomy of “readerly bad, writerly good,” had become “print bad, digital good.”

**d. Against the Day’s “Zone”**

While early experiments in hypertext fiction, such as Michael Joyce’s “Afternoon: a story” and Shelley Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl*, did not make it past a circle of initiates, it has become increasingly clear that literature—and the ways in which we read and interpret it—

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17 The three most common criticisms brought up against the hypertext theorists are that they oversimplify poststructuralist theory, that despite claims of liberation the reader is not entirely in charge, and that their claims suffer from their overly theoretical nature. Hayles, for example, notes about Landow and Bolter: “In conflating hypertext with the difficult and productive aporias of deconstructive analysis, these theorists failed to do justice either to the nuanced operations of works performed in electronic media or to the complexities of deconstructive philosophy” (32). Going a step further, Duguid argues that the incorporation of Barthes’s theories works against rather than for their theories: “while Barthes’s poststructuralist legacy merges easily with the general demonization of the book, it does not fit easily with ideas of pure, natural information or the grand information-retrieval concepts put forward by, for example, Vannevar Bush or Ted Nelson, the great forefathers of practical hypertext” (76). Similarly, theoretical notions of writerly texts and the empowerment of the reader do not transfer to hypertext as smoothly as Landow and Bolter suggest. Espen J. Aarseth, for example, mentions that the reader of hypertext fiction still only moves within boundaries set by the author. He writes, for example, that “the reader is as much at the constructor’s mercy in [Michael Joyce’s] *Afternoon* as in any difficult text” (89). It must be pointed out, however, that Bolter does not necessarily talk about hypertext fiction when he makes his claims about writerly texts but rather about something like Ted Nelson’s “docuverse,” in which all texts are interconnected and users are able to endlessly annotate each document (Nelson 53). Since there is always an original document written by an original author at the most basic level, Bolter acknowledges that readers “cannot read just anything but must still move within a structure set up by the first author” (38). At the same time, Bolter, Landow and others are not always careful to distinguish between hypertext fiction, something like Nelson’s docuverse, and hypertext as we know it from the internet. This vagueness has to do not only with the fact that in the early stages of the World Wide Web and electronic literature there were few real life examples for their claims, but also with the largely theoretical and hypothetical nature of their considerations. Marie-Laure Ryan has rightfully observed that in the fields of hypertext fiction and digital textuality there is a “precedence of theory over the object of study” (581). She therefore considers hypertext fiction “an arcane academic genre read mostly by theorists and prospective authors—by people more interested in writing about it than in reading it” (604).
would not remain untouched by technology. The founding of the Electronic Literature Organization (ELO) in 1999, the release of the Sony Reader and the Amazon Kindle in 2006 and 2007, respectively, and N. Kathryn Hayles’s introductory text *Electronic Literature. New Horizons for the Literary* have been important stepping stones towards new forms of reading and writing, although the pace with which new websites or devices come on the market has made it increasingly hard to make predictions. Since the past chapters have shown that Pynchon’s concerns have been indicative of much larger developments and that his novels help illuminate important aspects of postwar theory and reading practices, let us take a look again at Pynchon. Having followed Professor Renfrew’s advice to take a step back, look at the bigger picture, trace connections, and examine “varying interests” in reading, we now come back to *Against the Day*, which reiterates important aspects of Pynchon’s first five novels while simultaneously recasting them as comments on the Brave New World of digitality.

Just as each of Pynchon’s previous novels described “Zones” that reflected the contemporary reading environment, *Against the Day*’s setting not only shows obvious parallels to the zeitgeist at the beginning of the digital age but also issues a *caveat*. It is set in a time in which industrialization, inventions, international politics, and the beginnings of modernism promised enormous changes. All this is met by the characters with hope, unaltering faith in progress, and a good amount of naïveté. This can be seen from the very beginning of the novel in the group of aeronauts I have mentioned in Chapter 1: the Chums of Chance. *Against the Day* opens with the hopefulness, idealism, and excitement of the Chicago World Fair in 1893. The “hydrogen airship” of the Chums and their enthusiasm about the Fair’s “great Ferris wheel, alabaster temples of commerce and industry, sparkling lagoons, and the thousand more such wonders, of both a scientific and an artistic nature” (Pynchon, *AtD* 3) illustrate an optimistic faith
in technology and progress.\(^\text{18}\) The youthful enthusiasm of the Chums and the “electrical glow of the Fair” (Pynchon, AtD 21) express the optimism of America as it rushed into the 20\(^{\text{th}}\) century. Light and electricity, mentioned again and again in the novel, further stand for the ubiquity and all pervading influence of the new. As gaslight is replaced by electrical light, there are experiments about the “luminiferous Æther” (Pynchon, AtD 58), there is a “Ray-rush” into “the next untamed frontier” (Pynchon, AtD 121), and there are Nikola Tesla’s experiments with electricity (Pynchon, AtD 97-99). All this is done, as one character puts it, “to light our way into the coming century” (Pynchon, AtD 59). The enthusiasm and optimism exhibited here certainly mirror the excitement not only of hypertext enthusiasts such as Negroponte, Bolter, or Landow, but perhaps also of the general population and its embrace of the digital revolution. Apart from the apparent allusion in the telling name of one of the novel’s main characters (Webb Traverse), the connection between the setting of Against the Day and the beginning of the digital age is made especially clear in two passages which can be seen as nods towards Google, Wikipedia, Nelson’s “docuverse,” and the internet in general: the Chums’ discussion of “global streamings …—electromagnetic lines of force … [and] movements of populations and capital” (Pynchon, AtD 55) and the description of Tesla’s “World-System,” which is designed “for producing huge amounts of electrical power that anyone can tap in to for free, anywhere in the world” (Pynchon, AtD 33).\(^\text{19}\)

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\(^\text{18}\) This can be compared to the public’s response to another modern marvel that is not mentioned in the novel but that similarly marked the beginning of a new age: the Brooklyn Bridge, opened in 1883 and turned into a symbol of the spirit of modernism by artists such as Hart Crane or Joseph Stella.

\(^\text{19}\) There are, furthermore, several more or less open references to the war against terrorism, post-9/11 reactions, and the presidency of George W. Bush that provide even more parallels between Against the Day’s setting and the 2000s. See for example one of the Chums’ description of “episodes of military explosions in our nation’s history, deemed necessary to maintain the integrity of the American homeland against threats presented from all sides” (111), Kit’s Traverse’s contemplation on the word “terror” for which “the language of [the United States]… possessed no others” (732), the Chums’ trip to the “Counter-Earth,” where they find “an American Republic whose welfare … [had] passed … into the control of the evil and moronic” (1021), and another character’s remark that the country “got hijacked by capitalist Christer Republicans” (1058).
There is, however, also a dark side to all this. Despite the glow and optimism of the Fair, there are also “signs of cultural darkness and savagery” (Pynchon, AtD 22). Two major concerns of Against the Day are touched upon here: the opposition of light and darkness, also apparent in the novel’s epigraph (a Thelonious Monk quote: “It’s always night, or we wouldn’t need light”), and the opposition of innocence/idealism and corruption. The fall from grace and the corruption of an idealistic belief in progress is already advancing as the Chums visit the Fair. A conversation between several characters in Chapter 4 makes this clear early on. Discussing the “big parade of modern inventions, all spirited march tunes, public going ooh and aah,” one character notes that “someplace lurking just out of sight is always some lawyer or accountant” (Pynchon, AtD 33). Mason & Dixon’s narrative of the Enlightenment’s dispensing of some “ancient magick” (Pynchon, MD 487) is thus reiterated by Webb Traverse’s theory in Against the Day that “capitalism [may have] decided it didn’t need the old magic anymore” (79). This notion is further emphasized in the description of the Chicago stockyards. It is here, observes a friend of the Chums, “where the Trail comes to its end at last, along with the American Cowboy who used to live on it and by it,” and where “[t]he frontier ends and disconnection begins” (Pynchon, AtD 53). We could interpret this disconnection in Marxist terms, sociological terms, or in terms of the history of ideas as the disconnection between the ruling and the working class, between nature and industrial progress, or between Enlightenment thinking/rationalism and the experiences of the age of Modernism. Against the Day thus reflects what Eagleton, in a description of Modernism, has called “the crack-up of a whole civilization” (After Theory 64) and reminds us that the faith in technology and human progress did not keep the world from

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20 One need only read Erik Larson’s account of serial killer H.H. Holmes in The Devil in the White City to be reminded of this “separate, lampless world” (Pynchon, AtD 22).

21 See also the arrival of the Chums in the age of Modernism: “…somehow … the earlier, the great, light had departed, the certitude become broken” (Pynchon, AtD 551).
falling into “darkness and savagery.” Significantly, the notion of light, initially connected with the optimism of the Fair, is increasingly linked with destructive forces: the Tunguska event of 1908 is described as a “heavenwide blast of light” (Pynchon, AtD 779); World War I is anticipated and associated with light in a passage about a Belgian agent who “had seen into the fictitiousness of European power … in the terrible trans-horizontic light of what approached” (Pynchon, AtD 542);22 and one character, who discusses phosgene (the gas used as chemical weapon in World War I), explains that “it is light here which is really the destructive agent” (Pynchon, AtD 953).

If Against the Day portrays our “Zone,” all this should issue not only a political warning about the dark sides of progress and capitalism but also a kind of “wait-a-minute” response to the overly excited proponents of the Brave New World of digitality. Perhaps the “Trespasser” from the future who approaches one of the Chums gives us all a Luddite caveat: “you are such simpletons at the fair, gawking at your Wonders of Science, expecting as your entitlement all the Blessings of Progress” (Pynchon, AtD 555). This certainly brings to mind Birkerts’s observation that “[w]e embrace the computer revolution, the information highway, with the zeal of children presented with a new toy” (196).23 At the same time, Against the Day puts overly worried accounts such as The Gutenberg Elegies into perspective. An initial look at the various quests and readers reveals continuities with Pynchon’s previous work rather than radically new ways of

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22 It is not only the Belgian agent and the imagery of light and darkness that bring to mind Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness here. The “fictitiousness of European power” and the savagery of World War I recall both Kurtz’s “The horror! The horror!” (79) and Marlow’s remark about England: “And this also … has been one of the dark places of the earth” (5).

23 Birkerts’s fear that we may somehow be overwhelmed by our gadgets was countered ten years later by Time magazine’s selection of “You” as Person of the Year in 2006 (because of the user-generated content on YouTube, Wikipedia, MySpace and similar sites), claiming that people felt increasingly confident with their new toys and that it was the users rather than the machine who were in charge. One could of course argue that we make ourselves much too dependent on technology and that it therefore controls us to a degree. Anyone who has ever lost or broken their iPhone will know what I mean. On a more serious note, the failure of the Communications Decency Act in 1997 and similar attempts to regulate the internet exemplify the difficulty to control the Web.
reading—thus perhaps indicating that reading has not changed that much and that the quarrels at the universities have more or less remained the same.

e. Reading in Against the Day

I have pointed out several parallels between Against the Day and Pynchon’s previous novels in Chapter 1: in Pynchon’s sixth novel, we find numerous examples of quests that resemble Stencil’s hunt for V., the search for the mysterious land of Vheissu, Oedipa’s attempt to uncover the Tristero, Slothrop’s pursuit of the rocket, Prairie’s search for her mother, or Mason and Dixon’s drawing of lines. The quests in Against the Day show hopes and goals very similar to those portrayed in the other novels, and we can find analogous “messages”—among others, the critique of the retreat into nostalgia or the resistance to ultimate truths.

Wren Provenance’s search for Aztlán, the Chums and other characters’ quest for Shambhala, Lew Basnight’s not-quite-clear work as “psychical detective,” and Webb Traverse’s sons’ quest for avenging their father’s death all move towards a distinct goal: they are looking for their own V.s—hoping to find something “valuable,” certainty, or some form of enlightenment. Once again, then, Against the Day discusses our own goals in reading. The numerous scenes I have discussed thus far, which established parallels between the experiences of the characters and our own encounter with the novels, find correspondence in Against the Day not only in the time machine, the 360 degree panoramas, and The Book of the Masked I have mentioned in the Chapter 1 but also in a comment by Basnight’s boss about enlightenment:

Enlightenment is a dodgy proposition. It all depends on how much you want to risk. … It happens, of course. Out of the dust, the clouds of sweat and breath, the drumming of hooves, the animal rises up behind the field, the last you’d’ve
expected, tall, shining, inevitable, and passes through them all like a beam of
morning sunlight through the spectral residue of a dream. But it’s still a fool’s bet
and a mug’s game, and you might not have the will or the patience. (Pynchon,
*AtD* 239)

Even if we have mustered the will and patience to make it through *Against the Day*, we are still
constantly reminded of obstacles in the way of comprehension. Frank Traverse is being told for
example, “…maybe what you think you’re looking for isn’t really what you’re looking for.
Maybe it’s something else” (Pynchon, *AtD* 307), and the Chums are plagued by the “suspicion
that somewhere…they had missed something essential” (Pynchon, *AtD* 427). As such, *Against
the Day* reflects two general sets of reading concerns: fundamental anxieties in academic
reading, expressed for example in a statement in I.A. Richards’s 1942 book *How to Read a Page*:
“That suspicion of a missing clue is paralyzing” (14), but also fundamental anxieties that are
especially familiar to the source-hunting, clue-gathering, and decoding readers of Pynchon. We
can say, then, that *Against the Day* not only deals with reading in general but also functions as an
allegory for “reading Pynchon”—as a “map,” if you want, of Pynchon’s entire work.

This brings us back full circle to Renfrew’s map of the Balkans and the railroad lines as
metaphors for reading. Having discussed in the previous chapter the notion of Mason and
Dixon’s line as a metaphor for reading, it does not require much of an introduction to note that
the numerous references to railroads throughout *Against the Day* can similarly be read not only
as our imposition of an interpretation on the wilderness of the text but also—recall Renfrew’s
mentioning of “varying interests” visible on the map (Pynchon, *AtD* 689)—as a reminder of
various competing ways to interpret. The quest for Shambhala reiterates this: one of the Chums

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24 This is reiterated in a scene a few pages later when Merle Rideout is “convinced that years ago on the way west to Colorado he had missed something essential” (Pynchon, *AtD* 449).
notes that the Trans-Siberian Railroad is about “access to Shambhala” (Pynchon, *AtD* 259). If we consider Shambhala as a symbol of that-which-we-look-for-in-reading similar to *V.*, it becomes clear that the railroads providing access to it represent methods, strategies, or tools in reading. Any given literary text, thus, is a point of convergence for such railroads: once a text is published any number of railroads are drawn on its surface, making it, in the words of one of *Against the Day*’s characters, “a giant railway-depot, with thousands of gates disposed radially in all dimensions, leading to tracks of departures to all manners of alternate Histories” (Pynchon, *AtD* 682). We are further reminded of the openness of texts, and of Pynchon’s work in particular, by the Tunguska event, which similarly functions as a “railway-depot”: the novel offers several explanations but does not champion one over the others. As readers we are confronted with “Hundreds … of narratives, all equally valid” (Pynchon, *AtD* 682)—both in the text of *Against the Day* itself and in its possible and actual interpretations. Again and again, the novel foregrounds the multiplicity and complexity of the hermeneutic process and thus interpellates its readers to focus on the larger picture. As a basic presumption, we should recall two remarks I have mentioned before—the comment by *Gravity’s Rainbow*’s narrator that “each will have their personal rocket” (Pynchon, *GR* 741) and Dr. Zoot’s observation about time travel in *Against the Day*: “It’s different for everybody” (404).

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25 The fact that Pynchon uses the word *dimensions* rather than *directions* constitutes a modification of the map metaphor in that it creates more of a multi-dimensional web of interconnections—thus invoking hypertextual linking, networking, and “digital mapping.”

26 A Russian general suspects the Chinese or the Germans (780), while the people of Siberia think it was “Agdy, their God of Thunder” (780). It could also have been “some new munitions device” on a Russian airship (781), the side effect of time travel (782), the Trespassers from the future (793), the “Quaternion weapon” (784), or an electric beam sent by Tesla (794).
f. Bilocated Reading

Significantly, both the railroads and time travel are linked with bickering and conflict. If we consider both phenomena as metaphors for reading, it becomes obvious that the quarrels over railroad building privileges and time travel describe the various battles of the Culture Wars, the Theory Wars, and what Birkerts’s has called the “Reading Wars.” This is especially poignant in the time travelers’ conference at Candlebrow University: “From initial bickering over what non-specialists would have to deem trivial matters, disputes had grown with astounding rapidity into an all-out academic combat” (Pynchon, *AtD* 412). Just as some of the reading concerns I have described above show a clear continuity with Pynchon’s previous novels, the “mixture of nostalgia and amnesia” (Pynchon, *AtD* 406) at Candlebrow, which brings to mind the ivory tower and the hothouse I have discussed in Chapter 2, underscores the notion that scholars, both at the time travelers’ conference and, by analogy, in the academy of the 2000s, are still caught in the same absurd and frustrating discussions. The reading zeitgeist that *Against the Day* describes is therefore one that is marked by the arrival and celebration of new technologies, by maps and interconnections, but also by the continued quarrel over matters of reading. Caught not only between iconoclast and Luddite readers, but also (still) between proponents and opponents of theory, contemporary academic reading can be compared to Professor Renfrew, who is “afflicted … by a deep and fatal contradiction” (Pynchon, *AtD* 686). Resulting from “a rupture within a single damaged soul” (Pynchon, *AtD* 686), he has split into two selves: Renfrew and Werfner. In terms of this important theme in *Against the Day*, we can say that reading in the digital age has become unproductively “bilocated.” The petty discussions about the blessings and

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27 See for example, “the Eastern Question degenerated into an unseemly scramble for the vast wealth of the Ottoman Empire, expressed most vividly in the intrigues over which nation would end up getting the ‘Bagdad’ Railway Concession” (Pynchon, *AtD* 238).

28 See for example Mark Edmundson’s and Gerald Graff’s article in the MLA’s *Profession 2009*. 

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curses of technology (and the blessings and curses of literary theory) have distracted readers not only from more important questions (the politics and hermeneutics of reading, perhaps) but also from scrutinizing their own methods, strategies, and assumptions in reading.

In keeping with another concern of Pynchon, let us first look at the “excluded middles” and mediate between fears about the end of reading and an overeager embracing of the new. In the years since the introduction of the World Wide Web, hypertext, and electronic literature, books have obviously not become extinct and even e-books such as the Sony Reader or Amazon’s Kindle have shown that readers of literature still read linearly: from first to last page—with the occasional look, perhaps, at the text’s last sentence. Many of the predictions of both Luddite and iconoclast readers have not come to pass and maybe never will. E-books have for example proven Annie Proulx wrong, who said, “Nobody is going to sit down and read a novel on a twitchy little screen. Ever” (qtd. in Nunberg 9). On the other hand, neither Luddite nor iconoclast readers were entirely wrong either, and we have certainly not seen the end of technological developments with an impact on reading. Vast amounts of material formerly printed on paper (course catalogs, library catalogs, public transportation schedules and the like) have become digital. Multi-volume encyclopedias will more than likely sell increasingly less copies and, as has already happened, be produced on digital media or move online. Moreover, Wikipedia has become a literal translation of Landow’s and Bolter’s thoughts concerning the participatory nature of hypertext.

The “excluded middles” seem to come closest to what has occurred. My portrayal of the two opposed factions of Luddites and iconoclasts has not recorded the many scholars who have written levelheaded “wait-a-minute accounts,” which relativize some of the overly negative and/or gung-ho statements. Nunberg, for example, points out that both the bibliophiles and the

29 Although, to be fair, the screens of these e-books are neither “twitchy” nor “little.”
technophiles are guilty of a certain kind of fetishism (9) and, as mentioned before, warns about making predictions in the face of the rapidity of technological change (11). In the afterword to Nunberg’s *The Future of the Book*, Umberto Eco calls attention to an important distinction: “There is a confusion about two distinct questions: (a) will computers make books obsolete? and (b) will computers make written and printed material obsolete?” (299). Eco’s answer is yes and no. On the one hand, Eco believes that certain kinds of books such as encyclopedias or manuals will be made obsolete by the new technologies (299). This is not a bad thing, claims Eco: “There are too many books. … If the computer network succeeds in reducing the quantity of published books, this would be a paramount cultural improvement” (301). On the other hand, Eco believes that “[b]ooks will remain indispensable not only for literature, but for any circumstance in which one needs to read carefully, not only to receive information but also to speculate and to reflect about it” (300). The durability, accessibility, and ease of use will, according to Eco, keep books from being completely abolished (299-300). Similarly distinguishing between the future of the book as a physical object and the future of reading in general, both Landow (on the iconoclast side) and Petrucci (on the Luddite side) underline that they believe that “reading and writing fiction in this new environment [does not] in any way [represent] the death of fiction” (Landow, “Twenty Minutes” 231-32) and that “[r]eading, understood as an activity of accumulation or delight for the literate person, has a secure future” (Petrucci 345).

Since so many academics have written about (and are worried about) popular reading, let us move from academic to popular reading for a moment: despite the dizzying speed of developments and dire predictions about the place of books in this environment, popular reading

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30 Similarly, Hayles notes that electronic literature lacks print literature’s mechanisms for preservation and archiving. “The situation is exacerbated,” she writes, “by the fluid nature of digital media; whereas books printed on good quality paper can endure for centuries, electronic literature routinely becomes unplayable (and hence unreadable) after a decade or less” (39).
seems to be alive and well. \(^{31}\) Between 1994 and 1999, the number of book clubs in the United States almost doubled; at the end of the Nineties, nearly 500,000 such clubs existed (T. McConnell 53). Oprah’s Book Club, arguably the most famous readers’ club, was established in October 1996 in order to “get the country reading again,” as Oprah Winfrey put it (qtd. in Kaufman 223). The fact that most of Winfrey’s selections ended up on top of the bestseller lists shows that, at least in terms of sales, Winfrey’s endeavor was quite successful. \(^{32}\) Not long after the launching of Oprah’s Book Club a new phenomenon brought masses of readers to bookstores: J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, the first of seven Harry Potter novels. Although Harold Bloom, who found the writing “dreadful” and the book “terrible” ("Dumbing," par. 2), declared 35 million book buyers wrong (as the title of his *Wall Street Journal* article suggests), the Harry Potter series has undoubtedly turned millions of children into readers and has certainly contributed to the fact that in 1998 a *Publishers Weekly* survey found that 78 percent of teenagers considered reading a “cool thing to do” (T. McConnell 53). \(^{33}\) Even before the Harry Potter craze reached America, Walter Kirn, in a 1997 *Time* article, declared that “a New Age of Literacy has dawned” (106). The success of book clubs, the rising popularity of audiobooks, and promising new online booksellers such as *Amazon*, led Kirn to observe, “it appears, reading books (or listening to them in the Jeep) is to the 1990s what gymgoing was to the ’80s: something we plan to do, something we want to do and, by all appearances, something

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\(^{31}\) A good overview of actual readers can be found in the fourth chapter of *Reading Matters*, in which Catherine Sheldrick Ross describes “The Who, What, Why, Where, When of Reading.”

\(^{32}\) Rona Kaufman notes that Oprah’s Book Club was mainly an extra-academic project not acknowledged in literature departments—which may “illuminate the existence of the competition between the dominant reading practice of the academy and the alternative reading practice of the book club” (227). Although the reading practices of book clubs are not necessarily what I am interested here, it is nonetheless important to emphasize that Oprah’s Book Club powerfully demonstrated that reading books was still something that people did. Kaufman writes, “The power that Oprah wielded was breathtaking—frightening, even—but we can see in the testimonies the creation of a community of people who want to claim or reclaim literacy” (231).

\(^{33}\) Is the fact that the original title, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, was translated into “the Sorcerer’s Stone” perhaps an indicator that Bloom, whose *Boston Globe* article was titled “Dumbing down American readers,” was on to something?
everyone else is doing” (102). Unlike many other observers, Kirn was optimistic about the future of the book: “Far from killing off the book, computers seem to reinforce its dominance” (102).

In short: people still read, writers still write, hypertext fiction has not quite caught on, and academics still quarrel over similar questions as twenty year ago. Still, it would be naïve to say that nothing has changed. The way we acquire and share information has drastically changed in the past two decades, online journals and e-books have changed the material form in which we encounter texts, and new media have generated new areas to be studied in academia. Returning to Littau’s remark about the material form of texts as significantly contributing to “our relation to the written word” (14), it is important to point out that there have been new academic reading practices: new material to be studied and new forms of reading communities have generated new ways to read. Online reading communities, covering a range from the participatory readers Henry Jenkins has described in Textual Poachers (fans of popular television series that write fan newsletters, create fanzines, or attend conventions) to more academically oriented reading communities or websites such as the Pynchon Wiki, have blurred the boundaries between academic and popular reading. Game studies (as in Aarseth’s International Journal of Game Studies) and electronic fiction have shown that new material to be studied or read is being explored by interested academics and may find even more attention in the future. Many theorists of the new media have argued for a new kind of theory which takes into consideration the specificities of the new media (Hayles 30; Ryan 581; Aarseth 1). Aarseth’s Cybertext, Matthew Kirschenbaum’s Mechanisms. New Media and the Forensic Imagination, or Marie-Laure Ryan’s

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34 In 2000, Robert Coover published an article entitled “Literary Hypertext: The Passing of the Golden Age” in the now defunct online magazine Feed, in which he declared that the golden age of literary hypertext had come to an end in the wake of the success of the World Wide Web and its move beyond pure text.

35 Leitch calls them “communal close readers” (Living 39). Both Jenkins and Leitch emphasize that they differ from academic readers in their fanaticism and in the fact that they “repudiate the high/low cultural divide” (Leitch, Living 38).

36 For an interesting account of the Pynchon Wiki, see Ralph Schroeder and Mathijs De Besten’s “Literary Sleuths Online: e-Research Collaboration on the Pynchon Wiki.”
“Beyond Myth and Metaphor” are attempts to establish new forms of scholarly method and new categories to describe narrative forms in digital media. When considering the future of both reading and writing, we should also keep in mind what Hayles rightly points out in *Electronic Literature*:

> Literature in the twenty-first century is computational. … almost all print books are digital files before they become books; this is the form in which they are composed, edited, composited, and sent to the computerized machines that produce them as books. They should, then, properly be considered as electronic texts for which print is the output form. (43)

Renfrew/Werfner’s bilocation thus finds analogies in several interrelated binary tensions in contemporary reading: print/digital, predictions/actuality, Luddism/iconoclasm, and theory/no theory, for example. I have called these bilocations unproductive because they distract from an issue that I believe to be at the bottom of *Against the Day* and that can be seen as a specific response to the various proponents of liberation technology: it is not the technology that frees the reader, but the ways in which we read.

**g. Departures**

Just as Pynchon’s previous novels, *Against the Day* therefore both reflects and challenges the contemporary reading zeitgeist. It provides an excellent point of departure for closing my discussion of Pynchon and post-1945 reading practices because it not only reiterates many of the concerns I have discussed in the preceding chapters but also offers several important observations about the future of reading. As mentioned earlier, *Against the Day* can be considered as a map of Pynchon’s entire work: the description of the conference at Candlebrow
is reminiscent of the critique of the retreat into the ivory tower; the different quests for truth and enlightenment echo V.’s and The Crying of Lot 49’s challenging of paranoid readers; the notion of the “railway-depot” reflects a celebration of the freedom of the reader and a resistance to closure similar to that in Gravity’s Rainbow, while the railroad lines can be interpreted in the same way as Mason & Dixon’s line. This mapping of Pynchon’s previous work, combined with Against the Day’s sheer length, its interweaving of several narrative strands, and its oscillation between over a dozen main characters (not to mention hundreds of minor characters), can be seen to express the kind of interconnective thinking or reading some theorists see represented in hypertext and the new media. Perhaps we can consider Against the Day as an example for what Plant has described as “an emergent connectionist thinking” (203). Recalling some theorists’ claims about freedom through technology and the notion that the linearity of print culture has, in Littau’s words, “straight-jacketed us into a mode of linear thinking that was unthinkable in a pre-Gutenberg oral culture” (57), we can say that Against the Day and Pynchon’s work as a whole, in its multiplicity and its interconnectivity, force their readers to give up this kind of linear thinking and thus challenge not only presumptions about the novel but also the claims of “liberation technologists.” Perhaps it is not so much the material nature of texts that has forced us into linear thinking but rather our preconceptions about reading and writing. It may, then, not be so important to consider whether Kindle, hypertext, and digitality will alter our ways of reading, but rather to consider our goals, expectations, and strategies in reading. The notion that it is less the

37 For a similar reading of Gravity’s Rainbow, see Bruno Friedrich Arich-Gerz’s “‘We Got Him to Go Ultraparadoxical.’ Reading the Reading of the Books of Hypertexts with Pynchon’s Gravity’s Rainbow.”

38 See also William H Chafe, Harvard Sitkoff, and Beth Bailey’s A History of Our Time. Readings on Postwar America for a similar notion in a different context: “… the attacks of September 11, 2001, pointed to an irrefutable fact about the world at the beginning of the new millennium: its peoples and nations are increasingly connected” (394).
material nature of a text or technology that frees us, but rather the way we read, reiterates *Vineland*’s emphasis on resistant reading.

If we consider the various maps mentioned in the novel as representing the diverse railroad lines of interpretation that are imposed on a given text, then one character’s observation about a map of the Belgian Congo illustrates a core concern of *Against the Day* and stresses the freedom of the reader: the map, says anarchist Ratty McHugh, shows “the quite intolerable tyranny over people to whom the land really belongs” (Pynchon, *AtD* 935). 39 Not only in its form but also in its content *Against the Day* therefore celebrates an anarchic pleasure in multiplicity, openness, and reading itself. “Anarchism” in reading means not only the freedom from predetermined railways, the resistance to closure, and an acknowledgement of “something in the darkness” opposed to “daylight certainty” (Pynchon, *AtD* 828) but also resembles Franzen’s notion of reading as “a form of social opposition” (89) in a culture in which, as Don DeLillo has put it, everything “argues against the novel” (qtd. in Franzen 177). The notion of reading “against the day” becomes especially clear in a comment by Ratty McHugh’s wife which connects the concepts of time travel, the unmapped, and an oppositional stance: “This is our own age of exploration … into that unmapped country waiting beyond the frontiers and seas of Time. We make our journeys out there in the low light of the future, and return to the bourgeois day and its mass delusion of safety, to report on what we’ve seen” (Pynchon, *AtD* 942). The kind of reading suggested by the novel, then, is neither Luddite nor iconoclastic. Reading “against the day” is perhaps a little bit of both but does not amount to a compromise. Rather, it constitutes a

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39 The fact that the map shows the Belgian Congo but may actually refer to the Balkan Peninsula makes this a “bilocated” map on which “everything … stands for something else” (Pynchon, *AtD* 937)—which underscores the notion that it has to do with reading and interpretation. Note also that we are reminded of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* again. See for example, Marlow’s remark early in the novella: “The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much” (7).
third way in which the freedom of the act of reading is central. As a writer, Pynchon is both a
Luddite and an iconoclast: he is a Luddite in his warnings against premature predictions, against
an overeager and starry-eyed embracing of new gadgets, and against the dehumanizing effects of
technology. His novels stand as monuments of printed-on-paper books amongst adverse
proclamations of readers with short attention spans and of the end of books. He is an iconoclast
in that his work has bent, expanded, and challenged our preconceptions of the novel.

My analysis of Pynchon’s work in terms of post-World War II academic reading has
shown that he has continually been one step ahead of his readers and that he has had his finger
on the pulse of contemporary reading practices more than any other American author over that
time span. In thematizing and challenging these practices, Pynchon has written “against the day”
throughout his career.

It is encouraging that Against the Day ends on a more hopeful note than any other
Pynchon novel. I have mentioned earlier that the corruption of the optimism of the Fair
constituted a fall from grace. Significantly, then, the very last sentence of the novel reflects hope
and redemption: the Chums of Chance “fly toward grace” (1085). Even if the future of reading
might be different from reading “as we know it,” Against the Day suggests that we have certainly
not reached “the end of reading,” that reading may still offer hope, redemption, and
transcendence of “a world every day more stultified, which expected salvation in codes and
governments, ever more willing to settle for suburban narratives and diminished payoffs”
(Pynchon, AtD 876-77), and that artists will still continue “trying to redeem the world one little
rectangle of canvas at a time” (Pynchon, AtD 744). Against the Day begins and ends with the
embarkation and departure of the Chums of Chance’s airship and can be read as a novel of
As such, it emphasizes that the technological developments, the dawning of the digital age, and possible changes in reading practices are a great chance. After all, we may consider departure as “a denial of inevitability, an opening out from the point of embarkation, beginning the moment all lines are single up, an unloosening of fate as the unknown and perhaps the uncreated begins to make its appearance ahead and astern, port and starboard, everywhere an expanding of possibility…” (Pynchon, *AtD* 821).

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40 Note also that throughout the novel there are numerous—often quite touching—scenes of departure and goodbyes: Mayva and Kit (106), Hunter and Constance Penhallow (136), Mayva and Lake (265), Merle and Dally (317), Reef and Stray (366), Cyprian and Yashmeen (504), Dally and the Zombinis (574), Yashmeen, Günni, and Kit (635), Yashmeen and Kit (677), Lew leaving T.W.I.T. (693), Kit and Reef (746), Kit and Dally (747), Cyprian and Yashmeen (814-15), Cyprian and Danilo (847), Frank and Wren (930), Cyprian, Yashmeen, and Reef (961-62), Frank and Stray (1017), and Dally and Kit (1074).
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