

THE WASTE LAND AND THE RELEASE OF SOCIAL ENERGY: AN ELIOTEAN READING OF THOMAS PYNCHON'S FICTION*

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ABSTRACT

This essay discusses the striking influence of *The Waste Land* on Thomas Pynchon's oeuvre and evaluates the stylistic and thematic links connecting them. More specifically, the article centers on twin aspects of Pynchon's intertextual reframing of Eliot's representation of the waste land. The first refers to the use of certain motifs and symbols of the poem, such as the narrator's bouncy character, the living-dead condition of some personages, and the evocation of the violet hour. The second aspect concerns Pynchon's versions of the figure of Belladonna as a "lady of situations" and her relationship with the notion of waste associated with mythic thinking, ethics, and the complexity of life. These themes are developed intensely in Pynchon's oeuvre and are reflected in his complex experimental style.

KEYWORDS: Eliot, Pynchon, Wastelands, literary influence, Lady of situations, violet hour.

LA TIERRA DESOLADA Y EL FLUJO DE LA ENERGÍA SOCIAL:
UNA LECTURA ELIOTIANA DE LA NOVELÍSTICA DE THOMAS PYNCHON

RESUMEN

Este artículo estudia la gran influencia que *The Waste Land* ha ejercido sobre la narrativa de Thomas Pynchon a partir de vínculos tanto estilísticos como temáticos. Más específicamente, el artículo se centra en la reescritura intertextual que Pynchon efectúa de dos estrategias utilizadas por Eliot en la representación de la tierra desolada. La primera de ellas se refiere al uso de ciertos motivos y símbolos del poema, como el carácter imparable del narrador, la condición de muertos vivientes de algunos personajes o la evocación de la hora violeta. La segunda se refiere a las versiones que Pynchon construye de la figura de "Belladonna, the lady of situations" y la relación que esta figura eliotiana guarda con la noción de basura junto con su asociación al pensamiento mítico, la ética y la complejidad de la vida, nociones que adquieren gran intensidad en la narrativa de Pynchon y que se reflejan en la complejidad de su estilo experimental.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Eliot, Pynchon, tierras desoladas, influencia literaria, *Lady of situations*, hora violeta.



A close reading of Pynchon's fiction shows that, from the literal use of some well-known motifs of *The Waste Land* in his short stories, he advances to a more refined emulation of Eliot's style and themes in his longer narratives. His protagonists are frequently detective-surveyors whose mission, as in Eliot's poem, becomes an evaluation of the condition of the land, while trying to release the stagnant energy of society and ethically regenerate life. Departing from Eliot's readings on myth and vegetation ceremonies that characterized the early borrowings from the poem—as already found in Fitzgerald's, Faulkner's, and Steinbeck's fictions—Pynchon makes extensive use of *The Waste Land* to develop his own literary project. The novelist combines a symbolic consideration of double-sided female energy with a sustained denunciation of the dangers humans pose to land and life on the planet. The devastating effects of the Anthropocene is already symbolized in Eliot's poetry, and is further developed in Pynchon's works through the use of the notion of *waste*. It is the contention of this article that the poem breaks with old humanist conventions and anticipates posthumanist aesthetics. Eliot's poem thus cuts across the frontiers of Modernism to become one of the most ductile works in Anglo-American culture, here appreciated for its early description of physical and emotional stagnation, modern chaos, and complexity in its ethical quest to renew the forgotten language of religious spirituality.

As Eliot discloses in the first of his Notes, while writing *The Waste Land* he was greatly influenced by *The Golden Bough* (1915, 1922), James Frazer's study of comparative religions. Following the success of the poem, three of the best-known American novels of the period reflected Eliot's use of Frazer's ideas on fertility rituals and cyclical time. F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) are among the earliest novels to grasp the poet's representation of the ethical and historical conditions of modern societies.

Fifty years after the publication of Eliot's poem, Raymond M. Olderman published *Beyond the Waste Land* (1972), in which he analyzes work by some of the most notable American novelists of early Postmodernism: John Barth, Peter Beagle, Stanley Elkin, John Hawkes, Ken Kesey, Thomas Pynchon, and Kurt Vonnegut. In his selection, Olderman searches for a Grail knight that may restore the health of the dying king and bring water to the thirsty land, finding multiple connections with Eliot's work in these fictional representations of the wasteland that followed the twentieth century's second post-world war period. In the second part of his book, Olderman becomes attracted to the notion of conspiracy and its representation in Pynchon's first novel *V.* (1963), whose method, he affirms, is similar to Eliot's. In

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line with Olderman, the following pages evaluate how Eliot's powerful shadow extended much further into the future, to cover Pynchon's extensive literary project into the twenty-first century.

Echoing ancient religious beliefs collected in *The Golden Bough*, Eliot's poem provides readers with a representation of life as a circular pattern of death and resurrection, a "natural" course of action that, nevertheless, becomes disrupted due to the increasing spread of moral and physical waste, mostly generated by war and human greed. In Frazer's interpretation of the archaic mentality, deities and their priests symbolically die and resurrect, thus bringing about a similar regeneration of life and vegetation. In Eliot's poem the prophetic voice, in its multiple representations, seeks to awaken the "son of man" (Eliot 2015, 55) from the condition of being "neither / Living nor dead" (56). As this voice soon laments, April is the cruellest month, anticipating that the cycle of death and regeneration has stopped at the "violet hour" (63), reminiscent of Dante's *Purgatorio* VIII: 1-6.¹ Throughout his oeuvre, Pynchon progresses from a literal copy of Eliot's mythic symbolism in his first short stories to sharing the poet's realization that the cycle of life has stopped at different historical epochs, and especially during the period that extends from the 1960s to the 2010s. Despite Frazer's reiterative comments in *The Golden Bough* (1922, 824-26), at the beginning of the twentieth century the new faith in science and technology did not bring about an ethical renewal. In Eliot's greatest poem, fragmentation and wastage offer bleak prospects for the future of humanity. In the first part, the poet hints at the main reasons that brought about the decline of modern societies: pathetic leaders, lack of human emotions, a non-protective Church, the voices of false prophets, and an ever-present economic greed that can only result in war and a devastated land. About forty years later Pynchon, in his own fiction, adheres to Eliot's poetic perception of western culture.

One of the most obvious links between the two writers is in their understanding and use of complexity. Both resort to a difficult style as the only way to comprehend the multiple manifestations of contemporary life and the manifold circumstances that have brought it to a moral halt. In his celebrated essay "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921), Eliot proclaims the complexity of life and the obligation of poets to write a type of difficult poetry that avoids either/or certainties in favor of amalgamation, collage and indirectness, which makes his ideas look rather postmodern (Eliot 1966, 289). Decades later, Pynchon defends a similar poetics by means of a difficult style and of symbolic characters who live in a reality as complex as the poet understood it to be. Eliot grounded his poem in the cultivation of difficulty and uncertainty, and these attributes exist in Pynchon's representations of reality in different historical periods that reach out to the new posthuman paradigm of the turn of the millennium.

As Pynchon openly recognizes in *Slow Learner* (1984), at the outset of his literary project Eliot's symbolism of the wasteland looms obsessively. In the

¹ See Collado-Rodríguez 1994, 57-64.



Introduction to this collection of short stories, Pynchon discloses his own poetics while expounding on the impressions that rereading his early stories have on him. With his characteristic irony, here centered on his younger self as an inexperienced writer, the author reflects on his most important intertextual source. He believes that his story “The Small Rain” represents his greatest literary mistake:

Most of what I dislike about my writing is present here in embryo, as well as in more advanced forms. I failed to recognize, just for openers, that the main character’s problem was real and interesting enough to generate a story on its own. Apparently I felt I had to put on a whole extra overlay of rain images and references to “The Waste Land” ... I was operating on the motto “Make it literary.” (1984, 6)

The mischievous author seems to play with his readers at the end of the Introduction when, by stressing his apparent anxiety of influence, he ironizes again with the help of another Eliotean notion:

Displacing my personal experience off into other environments went back at least as far as “The Small Rain.” Part of this was an unkind impatience with fiction I felt then to be “too autobiographical.” Somewhere I had come up with the notion that one’s personal life had nothing to do with fiction, when the truth, as everyone knows, is nearly the direct opposite. (1984, 23)

Most likely, the idea that “one’s personal life had nothing to do with fiction” has its source in Eliot’s famous contention that “the emotion of art is impersonal” (1966, 22) from his influential essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919). Accordingly, most of the early stories Pynchon collected in *Slow Learner* reveal close links to Eliot’s poetry, links that combine his early rejection of binary choices to understand reality with specific motifs taken from *The Waste Land*. Thus, “The Small Rain,” the first story in the collection, shows Eliot’s pervasive influence. Its heterodiegetic narrator describes life as a categorical space where, despite the protagonist’s aversion to them, social hierarchies cannot be avoided. In this story of a group of soldiers who go to the rescue of civilians after a natural flood, there is a strong separation between the regular soldiers and their officers. Pynchon’s first protagonist, a Jewish-American private called Levine, anticipates the writer’s use of other schlemihls in his later fiction. Despite his university education, which could have granted him an officer’s commission, Levine wants only to be left alone. He is the first in a list of Pynchonian characters who replicate Eliot’s living-dead inhabitants of the waste land who cross London Bridge, or the passive reader whom the narrator addresses at the end of “The Burial of the Dead.” “You! hypocrite lecteur! –mon semblable, –mon frère!” (Eliot 2015, 57). They suffer from acedia and are a perfect example of death in life. Eliot likens them to Dante’s ghosts in the Limbo: “A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many” (Eliot 2015, 57).

The military camp where the soldiers are stationed is comically called Fort Roach, a name that inaugurates Pynchon’s interest in the motif of wastage, and a primary symbol of everything and everybody that has become a residue in the



thermodynamic representation of life that the writer devises in his fiction. Levine “had quietly and unobtrusively gone native” (28), he had become a straw man, an entropic character devoid of energy. As one of his fellow soldiers defines him, the protagonist “doesn’t want to work and therefore he is afraid to let down roots. He is a seed that casts himself on stony places, with no deepness of earth” (39).

First published in 1960, “Low-lands” is the second story in *Slow Learner* and the first to feature what will become some of the most persistent motifs in Pynchon’s fiction. The most significant of these, again offering a clear link to *The Waste Land*, is the theme of wastage. The setting is represented as an actual dump. Protagonist Dennis Flange is a version of Eliot’s neurasthenic woman’s silent interlocutor in “A Game of Chess”:

‘My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me.
Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak.
What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?
I never know what you are thinking. Think.’

I think we are in rats’ alley
Where the dead men lost their bones. (Eliot 2015, 59)

Pynchon describes Flange as a communications officer in the Navy who is unable to communicate with his wife. He sees the sea as a woman and ultimately as the “Low-lands” that he imagines as a “gray or glaucous desert, a waste land which stretches away to the horizon” (63). His marital disgust makes him finally go with a friend to an actual dump, where he falls asleep. When he seems to wake up, he hears the voice of a gypsy girl who invites him to follow her along a labyrinth that leads to her bed, where he finds a rat that the girl calls “Hyacinth.” He explains that an old fortune teller, Violetta, read her fortune years ago. In Eliot’s poem, the modern fortune teller is Madame Sosostriis, whose voice is muffled and whose prophecy, like her vision, fails. Such Eliotean symbolism marks the beginning of Pynchon’s obsession with depicting contemporary western civilization as a growing heap of rubbish where the cycle of life is stalled and the land cannot overcome the uncertain “violet hour”:

The river’s tent is broken; the last fingers of leaf
Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind
Crosses the brown land, unheard. The nymphs are departed.
Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.
The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends
Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed. (Eliot 2015, 62)

The reality portrayed in Pynchon’s fiction becomes increasingly complex and difficult to understand, his representations of western society becoming pessimistic from the third story in *Slow Learner*, “Entropy” (1960). Since then, Pynchon has partially modified Eliot’s symbolism by adding thermodynamics to the contemporary



interpretation of wastage, in line with its second law: characters and topics related to entropy supplement Eliot's symbol of the waste land.

The limits of traditional binary terms are transgressed and opposites sometimes achieve a point of reconciliation in the symbolic vertex of the letter "v," which has saturated Pynchonian cartography since his first novel, *V.* (1963). However, the letter cannot get rid of the significant effects of the "violet hour," with the book offering a social analysis of the fin de siècle and modernist ethos in contrast to those of contemporary times. Here, Pynchon's ongoing literary project starts to combine the Eliotean themes of the lady of situations and wastage with the ideas of American historian Henry Adams in his autobiographical *Education*, particularly in Chapter xxv, "The Dynamo and the Virgin" (1904). When visiting the Paris World's Fair of 1900, Adams wonders about the mysterious force that was, in his imagination, the source that built the cathedrals of Europe, a "moral force" that extended from ancient times to the contemporary energy generated by the powerful dynamos and even by the "new rays" represented in the newly discovered radium (Adams 1900, 858). The different manifestations of that ancient force that Einstein was to call simply "energy" in the formulation of his Relativity Theory –and which Adams linked to morality and social energy– constitute one of the core issues in Pynchon's representations of western society. However, the ways in which such a force developed in modern history is embodied in powerful female characters who, like Belladonna, become "ladi[es] of situations" (Eliot 2015, 56). From symbols and characters related to Venus and the Virgin, throughout his work Pynchon evaluates the power of this archetypal female to transform old societies into new ones at different moments and places in western history. As I have stated elsewhere (2015, 256-57), these moments cover an ample period that goes from the Enlightenment to post-9-11 New York. Always embodied in a female character, Henry Adams's mysterious force is both the Virgin and Lady of the Rocks and the lady of situations. She may be morally right or wrong and find embodiment in housewife and metaphysical detective Oedipa Maas, in dangerous cyborgian spy Lady V., in sexualized Frenesi Gates, or in pragmatic detective Maxine Tarnow. However, she is inescapably linked to the notions of wastage, social dissolution, and entropy, with strong echoes from *The Waste Land* always discernible in the background.

In his early narratives, Pynchon's ambiguous figure of the Lady V. –she features in the short story "Under the Rose," as well as in *V.*, and *Gravity's Rainbow*– becomes the contemporary manifestation of Adams's "track of [social] energy" (Adams 1900, 863), symbolized by the Virgin in the Middle Ages. Pynchon evaluates the female manifestations of energy throughout a period that extends from the last years of the nineteenth century to the Second World War (see Tanner 1982). This first Pynchonian "lady of situations" eventually becomes an evil doer, connected to the dangerous radioactive power that Henry Adams, during his visit to the Paris World's Fair, also perceived as the newest manifestation of energy. Eventually, the Lady V. turns into the Bad Priest and, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon's encyclopedic third novel, is destroyed by her own faction.

However, the writer has previously revealed his enormous indebtedness to Eliot in his first novel. *V.* is not only a reflection of the human process that transforms



primordial energy into a technological and fascist cyborg. In their clashes with the two male protagonists, different female characters and the Island of Malta also offer other versions of “the lady of situations.” A fictional reflection of Henry Adams, the character of Herbert Stencil is a hyper-rational quester who pursues the same aim as the historian, “to follow the track of the energy.” Meanwhile, on the other side of the V letter stands Benny Profane, defined as a “schlemihl and human yo-yo,” who symbolically appears in the story on Christmas Eve 1955, in Virginia. Traditionally understood as a symbol of the desacralized energy of the Virgin in contemporary times (Seed 1988, Eddins 1990, Chambers 1992), Profane wanders the streets of Norfolk, Washington DC, and New York as an entropic god, incarnate with neither the power nor the wish to liberate traditional American society from its old prejudices and moral stagnation. Born in a Hooverville and frequently associated with the inanimate, this half-Catholic, half-Jewish schlemihl is very attractive to women who, like Rachel Owlglass, or the mysterious Paola (born in Malta, the Mediterranean Rock), wish to be mothers. Like Jesus Christ’s disciples after the Pentecost, Paola “knew scraps it seems of all tongues” (14). She has inherited the strength of Mara, the ambiguous female deity that helped the Christian knights defeat the Turks in Malta, the island that the shining sun turns into an Eliotean red rock. However, as Astarte, she is also the powerful force that sends the big wave that kills British spy Sidney Stencil, Herbert’s father, in 1919. Spirit, woman, mother, lover, cyborg, or dual Jungian anima, the force that obsesses Herbert Stencil/Henry Adams becomes in this first novel the Belladonna with multiple signifiers that the male characters can never understand nor possess.

By the time the Lady V. is killed, this female manifestation, combining Adams’s social force and Eliot’s Belladonna, has already reappeared in the writer’s second novel, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966). Here, she is embodied in Republican housewife Oedipa Maas, a personage of the 1960s who is on a number of occasions openly associated by the narrator with Venus and the Virgin (1966, 23, 40-41, 87, 128). The “lady of situations” has turned into a metaphysical detective whose role is to execute the will of a former lover, the rich land developer Pierce Inverarity. Morally distant from her predecessor, the unethical cyborg Lady V., Oedipa’s epic internal journey takes her to survey the land and people of California in the 1960s and then to understand the necessity to fight against categorical thinking and reinstate the importance of the balancing social middle. Close to the end of her adventure, Oedipa realizes the painful existence of the many invisible dispossessed who live at the margins of society, including the mysterious Trystero gang, defined by the acronym WASTE. In a scene that calls to mind Eliot’s “Lady of the Rocks,” she encounters an old sailor whose pain transforms her symbolically into a contemporary Virgin of the Pietá. At that moment, Oedipa

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



However, Pynchon's second novel offers no clear ending. Whether Oedipa will be able to release the flow of social energy that the status quo has kept systemically stagnant, or whether the American society of the 1960s will remain ideologically motionless in their violet hour, is unclear. In any case, Pynchon's evaluation of other historical periods in his later fiction insistently points to the struggle between confining conventional values and the release of moral and vital energy.

The encyclopedic and highly praised *Gravity's Rainbow* thus offers a parodic description of devastated Germany at the end of Second World War. With a male protagonist interestingly called Tyrone Slothrop (T.S.), entropic waste rules again even if there are several female characters who try to bring about the much needed regeneration of life while escaping from the patriarchal repression that suffocates, if not actually kills them.

Thomas Pynchon traps readers in an Einsteinian reality that goes beyond our capacities. Knowledge varies according to the momentum and place of the observer. Fantasy, dreams, drugs, fairy tales or séances extend the ontological experiences of Pynchon's characters in a new Eliotean report on the more recent post-world war period. Sex and war, as frequently happened in *The Waste Land*, are linked together thanks to Slothrop, who combines his puritan lineage with sexual charm and a strange link to a specific type of plastic, Imipolex. Female energy, manifested in a number of women who have become sexual slaves of Nazi, Russian, British, and American males, has to suffer the results of the war, epitomized in the deadly V2 rockets, and its persistence in the almost indestructible plastic that will grow to become the most infectious type of waste the Anthropocene has created. Pynchon makes his narrator, already a hyper-metafictional voice, jump in time and place to different scenarios where men belonging to several political factions are creating a new world order based on the dual power of the rocket as destroyer and instrument to colonize the stars. The story takes place, as Weisenburger states, over "a nine-month period in which the novel's main action occurs, from early December 1944 to early September 1945, a nearly closed circle or partial mandala to which Pynchon attached a myriad of leaps and loops backward, forward and around in historical time" (2011, 49). The place where the narrative unfolds is mostly the London hit by the V2s and the German ruins of 1945. The different parties in the war are fighting to advance into a world order that Norbert Wiener, in his influential book *The Human Use of Human Beings* (1950), had already warned his readers about and that Weisenburger again synthesizes as follows:

So the terminus of History's arc, and the Zone's archetypal space, is the death camp. In *V*. Pynchon had located one historical origin of it during the German campaign of extermination in South-West Africa. In *Gravity's Rainbow* he realizes the concentration camp as that uniquely modern space in which any sovereign power—or "They-system"—denationalizes and denaturalizes the subject, then turns it into a laboring machine until, its Productivity exhausted, its life is snuffed. (52)

Men like filmmaker Miklos Thanatz (from Thanatos, death), Dominus Blicero, aka Nazi Lt. Weissmann (Whiteman), or Russian Tchichérine advance in that deadly condition by always trying to dominate the females who symbolize



the primordial energy of life in the writings of Adams and Eliot. Belladonna, especially incarnated in counter-spy and dominatrix Katye aka Gretel, is trapped by the suffocating patriarchy, which announces a new Kingdom of Death on the Moon. Even Lt. Slothrop experiences in Katye's arms the contradictory power of her primordial energy:

He lies on top of her, sweating, taking great breaths, watching her face turned $\frac{3}{4}$ away, not even a profile, but the terrible Face That is No Face, gone too abstract, unreachable: the notch of eye socket, but never the labile eye, only the anonymous curve of cheek, convexity of mouth, a noseless mask of the Other Order of Being, of Katje's being—the lifeless non-face that is the only face of hers he really knows, or will ever remember. (1973, 222)

Not surprisingly, schlemihl Slothrop ends up fragmented and dissolved in Pynchon's ontological game, as an anticipation of the failure represented by late capitalism. Although the Nazis are defeated, the alternative kingdom of plastic symbolized by younger patriarchal America is no alternative for a better world. History has taught us that death camps and industrial and technological slavery would increase in the following decades, together with new wars and intense environmental problems.

After a silence of seventeen years, in 1990 Pynchon published *Vineland*. Oedipa Maas's hopes in the 1960s, for a regenerated land where civil rights would be allotted to everybody, have failed after a sustained period of political conservatism. The narrator warns readers that, "Developers in and out of state had also discovered this shoreline in the way of the wind, with its concealed tranquilities and false passages, this surprise fish-trap in the everyday coast. All born to be suburbs, in their opinion, and the sooner the better" (1990, 319). The late 1980s represent a context of simulated prosperity, with the old Californian dream having already become the superficial way of life emanating from TV, Hollywood, and Disneyworld.

In a land where the new centers of power are TV, the cinema, and the shopping mall, the new Pynchonian male protagonist, Zoyd Wheeler, is another schlemihl whose wife, Frenesi Gates, represents the transformation of the vital moral energy of the 1960s into the conservative patriarchal power of the commodified 1980s.² Symbolically, in line with Pynchon's old quest to trace the source of energy, Frenesi as "lady of situations" eventually abandons her hippie husband and her young daughter Prairie to become the lover of FBI agent Brock Vond. Entropy and waste rule at the end of the millennium and Pynchon, always attentive to popular cultural

² As Joseph Slade perceptively argues, "What happened to the rocket [in *Gravity's Rainbow*] happens [in *Vineland*] to television: an instrument for change becomes an instrument of the status quo. The inventors of the rocket in Pynchon's third novel were guided by dreams of escaping gravity, of breaking down national borders, of achieving new knowledge [...]. Similarly, idealistic young Americans were enthusiastic over the power of television to expose political or economic malfeasance..." (1994, 70).



manifestations, draws the characteristic new symbol of the times: the Thanatoids. With colonial Vietnam War in the background, the narrator grotesquely describes its traumatized veterans as posthuman slaves trapped in the dreamy and technological American world of Baudrillard's simulacra:

While waiting for the data necessary to pursue their needs and aims among the still-living, Thanatoids spent at least part of every waking hour with an eye on the Tube. "There'll never be a Thanatoid sitcom," Ortho Bob confidently predicted, "cause all they could show'd be scenes of Thanatoid watchin' the Tube!" (170-171).

This particular breed of Eliotean living-dead remain on earth only to "advance in the condition of death" (171). War trauma and technological simulacra have replaced ancient myth. As the Fisher King, they are stuck between life and death, in the violet hour, and are in need of a questing knight who may find the Grail for them. Despite its ambiguous ending –which might only be a dream– *Vineland* resolves in a release of repressed energy thanks to the updated versions of female V. that come to replace Frenesi in the fight against conservative America. While trapped in the technological web of posthumanity, Frenesi thinks that God is perhaps a hacker who uses a computer to decide our destiny in terms of ones and zeroes (90-91), but powerful "ninjette" DL and young Prairie represent the return of the old power of Venus and the Virgin. Vond is finally defeated in the mythic land of magical realism, once the narrator has described his nightmare with the female energy that he wants to control but that eventually destroys him:

He could hear her breathing, waiting for him –helplessly he opened, entered, as she advanced on him, blurry, underlit, except for the glittering eyes, the relentless animal smile, and accelerating leapt at him, on him, and underneath her assault he died (274-275).

Prairie, as representative of the new energy, shows her character as young "lady of situations" by escaping from Vond, despite being strongly attracted to the FBI agent. At the end of the story, she wakes up. Everything might have been only a dream, and readers would have to wait seven more years until Pynchon publishes his next novel, one that seeks out the origins of so many American contradictions. John Leonard explains that *Mason & Dixon* (1997) is a novel in which

[f]rom historical odds and ends and the Field Journal they left behind, Pynchon re-imagines Mason and Dixon before, during and after the four-plus years, 1763 to 1767, they took to draw their 244-mile-long line through the American wilderness, dividing the proprietorships of the Penns of Pennsylvania and the Calverts of Maryland, ordaining our North and South. (1997, 56).

A mock-heroic historical novel about land "proprietorships," alternate realities and an enormous work of complex literary experimentation, many of its characters have as their initial a V. The destinies of the two protagonists become linked after an initial event in which both have to study the transit of Venus. The Pynchonian symbol that represents both the female energy of the Virgin and the



convergence of opposites is attributed to new and historic mechanical devices, such as Vaucanson's Mechanical Duck, here a female that also has a double (376). Because Pynchon's story is a lengthy reflection on the Enlightenment and the years that preceded the creation of the new American country, what Mason and Dixon find in their endless voyages of land surveys clearly evokes and expands the journeys of Oedipa Maas up and down California. Wherever they go on the globe, the project of Enlightenment and the prerevolutionary years mean commerce, consumerism, and colonialist profit. Having revealed their many differences at the beginning of their journey, Mason and Dixon advance gradually towards the vertex of V, here symbolized in the ampersand of the novel's title. These two historical surveyors drew the dividing line that was to become a symbol of the American Civil War, a line also called *Visto*. However, they were also astronomers and understood astrology. Accordingly, they also knew how to make the horoscope, thus emulating the Eliotean Madame Sosostriis and Pynchon's gypsy seer from his early story, who is modelled on Violet Piping (549). Dreams, fantasy, reason, embedded stories, different narrative genres, and history amalgamate in a striking novel that shows that even at its birth American Democracy was already trapped by money and profits, but also that small narratives, where opposing characters become dear friends, can counteract the grand narratives.

Additionally, *Mason & Dixon* also reveals the increasing amounts of social waste that the Enlightenment brings with it: dispossessed black slaves, humiliated women, invisible murdered natives. In his next novel, Pynchon makes it clear that, once the line was drawn, American history became intimately linked to the First Industrial Revolution.

Advancing chronologically through his oeuvre, the longest of Pynchon's novels and his first post-9/11 narrative *Against the Day* (2006) possibly is his closest book to Eliot's poem and style. If the modernist poet advised his colleagues to be difficult and indirect, the postmodernist writer takes this advice to its limits and transports his readers to an extremely complex mixture of past, present, and future. Alternate realities, multiple plots, and mixed literary genres recall a large number of invented and historical popular events and artifacts that extend from the 1890s to the 1920s, enlarging Pynchon's historical revision of social energy initiated in *V.*, while also coinciding with the main temporal setting of *The Waste Land*. Bernard Duyfhuizen summarizes Pynchon's book as a work that "includes some 170 characters, and covers the globe from the west coast of America to inner Asia, locating many historical events in new juxtapositions—yet, the text repeats the mantra found in many Pynchon novels: 'everything fits together, connects'" (2011, 71).

In Eliot's description of London, the scene borrowed from Spenser's "Prothalamion" is perceived as real, while the modern waste is unreal, in a strange mixture of time periods.

The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends
Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed. (Eliot 2015, 62)



Within the narrative frame of the novel, a typical Pynchonian narrator who tells the story from the future (our present) delivers this mixture with an enormous number of explicit and implicit references to Eliot's poem and to his own novels. "Constantinople is wasteland," says one character (Pynchon 2006, 830), while gradually another starts to look like Tiresias (955). The story frequently recalls the settings used by Eliot in *The Waste Land*, especially in Lew's episodes in London, as both Eliot's poem and Pynchon's novel experiment with mixing time and space; both refer to the same moment of history, which certainly qualifies as highly "entropic." There is an accumulation of séances and interpretations of the Tarot: readers are thus comically informed that one morning Lew walked into a breakfast parlor and "took from an inner pocket a Tarot deck thinned to the twenty-two Major Arcana and dealt them one by one onto the table, between the remains of a vegetarian haggis and a platterful of pea fritters" (605). The demoted function of myth and vegetation ceremonies may echo Eliot's "mythical method" (1923), but it also offers an intertextual interpretation of Pynchon's abundant recourse to psychic archetypes, angels, centers of power, gates to be trespassed by the initiated, conversations with the dead, and, once again, to the role of Belladonna as a contradictory symbol of energy.

Readers of *The Waste Land* may quickly realize the reiterative use of motifs related to the notion of social decadence and to the stoppage of the life cycle. As happened in Eliot's poem, people –even the narrator– are described as "neither / Living nor dead," (Eliot 2015, 56) with the Eliotean *twilight* (a term often repeated in Pynchon's novel)³ constantly evoking the process of decadence of western civilization and death. Even echoes from a combined Baudrillard/Stetson can be heard when readers are informed that "a large American population was forever passing through Paris, changing addresses or lying about them. Some might've been ghosts from the War with unfinished business in the city" (1068).

Once again, as happens in Pynchon's earlier fiction, especially in *The Crying of Lot 49*, darkness symbolizes the territory of the dispossessed, of the margins of social discourse where unknown forces may be ready to accost the passerby but where the invisible may paradoxically acquire visibility. From the false prophecies represented in the Kabbala and multiple references to the Chapel, readers of *Against the Day* can also enjoy different manifestations of Belladonna, "the lady of situations." From female representations such as the Suffragettes or Yashmeen (who strongly recalls Oedipa Maas), the story advances to card number II of the Major Arcana, the High Priestess, and to Father Ponko's interpretation of female power. "When God hides his face," he says, "it is paraphrased as 'taking away' his Shekhina. Because it is she who reflects his light, Moon to his Sun. Nobody can withstand pure light, let alone see it. Without her to reflect it, God is invisible. She is absolutely of the essence if he is to be at all operative in the world" (960). Such amalgamation of opposite powers, male and female, as in Eliot's Tiresias, brings life, while female darkness offers the necessary protection against the male light of day.

³ See pages 454, 543, 544, 551, 580, 805, 828, 851, 880, 941, 945, 973, and 1057.



Pynchon's penultimate novel, *Inherent Vice* (2009), represents a return to his Californian settings and offers a new version of nostalgia for the 1960s and the failure of the counterculture to replace the existing status quo. As John Miller perceptively argues, had "*Inherent Vice* been published in 1970, it might have been read as contemporary satire" with a touch of film noir (2013, 234). This time the protagonist is a male detective, Doc Sportello, who in 1970 has to fight against evil forces, again represented by land developers, the villains in an adventure in which his wife, a woman interested in the riches and luxury that these moguls offer her, has abandoned the schlemihl male once more. The main quest in Sportello's story is to help this "lady of situations" in an always-changing landscape that already features some early computers, together with living-dead characters and other reiterative Eliotean motifs. Evaluating the condition of the land, developer Crocker Fenway cynically tells the detective by the end of the book that he mostly values being in place: "we're in place. We've been in place forever. Look around. Real estate, water rights, oil, cheap labor—all of it's ours, it's always been ours" (Pynchon 2009, 347). As Miller also argues, these crooked developers "have the power to rewrite the landscape, erasing its history and imposing their own narrative on it" (2013, 235). At the end, Shasta, as "lady of situations," does not reunite with Sportello, whose condition remains uncertain as he drives through the fog of the Santa Monica Freeway when it is getting dark. Could the author rewrite the narrative, and the waste condition of the land be dispelled?

Pynchon's demand for the release of the social forces of history returns one more time. On this occasion, computers offer the gateway to virtual reality, the space that progressively replaces the physical landscape that preceded the technological revolutions of the twentieth century. *Bleeding Age* (2013) incorporates virtual reality as the property that has become the center of speculation and power for the new "land" developers in the hyper-saturated society of simulacra. Information has finally become the force that Henry Adams understood as the source of life. Accordingly, new evildoers want to control its flow. The story takes place in 2001, a year that marks not only the entrance into the third millennium, but also the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Maxine Tarnow, Pynchon's latest protagonist, is a female detective whose task will be to fight against this new type of evildoer and to release the emotional forces of life at a time in which technology is trapping people in a new limbo. In *Bleeding Age*, Pynchon draws a description of contemporary life where the limits between death and life are trespassed by the posthuman being that has emerged from the current application of cutting-edge technologies to our vital experience. Thus parodic references to a society of zombies abound, now affected by the new addiction to virtual reality that, as predicted by McLuhan (1964, 41-42), turns people into dumb slaves of the system, the new type of Eliotean living-dead, "We who were living are now dying/With a little patience" (Eliot 2015, 68). There are remarkable similarities between the characters of Oedipa Maas and Maxine Tarnow (Robson 2013, 56; Nelson 2014, 58), supporting the idea that the latter is Pynchon's new Belladonna, whose role is again to release the social and moral strength of the country. Both women are associated with real estate moguls, and both are explicitly linked to the figure of the Virgin (Pynchon 1966, 118-27; Pynchon 2013, 13, 170).



They are also fond of driving an Impala, which links them to their ultimate aim: to bounce and engage the stagnant social energy that old realty developers and new internet moguls have appropriated to control both the real and the virtual land. Additionally, the notion of waste becomes present throughout Maxine's adventure, including a long passage dedicated to the Island of Meadows. The island has been formed literally by garbage but, as the narrator soon discloses, "Like the Island of Meadows, DeepArcher also has developers after it" (Pynchon 2013, 167); DeepArcher ("Departure") is, in the virtual world the novel describes, a website represented by an avatar characterized by Trystero features, a new land where the dispossessed can still find refuge.

However, in Pynchon's latest –perhaps last– narrative there seems to be a more optimistic ending to the tale. Maxine becomes a much harder "lady of situations" than Oedipa was. Although in *Bleeding Edge* V. stands mostly for Virtual, she is able to defend the weak and dispossessed by pointing her real gun at Gabriel Ice, the real-estate turned dot-com millionaire who embodies the evil destroyer of the new land. Even if she becomes briefly addicted to the Internet portal, Maxine is able to release herself, expose the dangers of posthuman virtuality, and unveil the sinister patterns of control looming above the new society of information. Once she has defeated Ice, Maxine again drives the old bouncing Impala, a car dating back to the countercultural times in which Oedipa drove the same model. She drives back home on an early morning in which "once again, overnight, all together, pear trees have exploded into bloom" (475). Springtime has finally come and the cycle of life has bounced back from its stoppage; and it seems that, at least for now, in Pynchon's Eliotean fiction April is no longer the cruellest month.

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