The Myth of the Enlightened Supermen in *Gravity's Rainbow*

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Abstract

This paper sets out to examine the influence of Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* on post-war American literature. Despite being widely recognized as a seminal work of the Frankfurt School critical theory as well as the forming of the socio-political counterculture movement of the 1970s, *Dialectic*'s influence on the lower arts like superhero comic books has barely been explored in the academic debate. In his postmodern novel *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), Thomas Pynchon incorporates this scientific myth of enlightenment throughout the narrative. This paper draws the historical, political and cultural connections between the origin of the superhero and the enlightenment's *Übermensch*.

Key Words: Pynchon, Adorno and Horkheimer, Enlightenment, Postmodernism, Historiography, Comic Books, Superhero, Mythology

Introduction

> Superman will swoop boots-first into a deserted clearing, a launcher-erector sighing oil
>
> through a slow leak-seal, gum evoked from the trees, bitter manna for this bitterest of
>
> passages. The colors of his cape will wilt in the afternoon sun, curls on his head begin to
>
> show their first threads of gray
>
> - Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*

Before Rocket 00000, bearing its human sacrifice, is even launched the narrator interjects ahead of the final countdown to squash any hopes of a heroic last-minute save. Standing uselessly on the launch site, Superman's limp cape and the greying hairline tarnishes the Man of Steel's perceived immortality, both physically and symbolically. Whereas the Superman we know—that paradigm of Truth, Justice and the American Way—would be devastated by this failure and still try everything in his otherworldly powers to salvage the situation, Pynchon's Superman, puzzled, shrugs his miscalculations off as "that singularity" (892) and returns to the *Daily Planet*. This subversion of the superhero is just one of many events that come and go without context or resolution in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Then again, Pynchon does not need to explain the concept of superheroes, given their ubiquitous presence in popular culture. He need not even explain or justify going against the grain to portray superheroes as ineffective in the grand, convoluted scheme of things because even at the time of the novel's publication in 1973 the idealistic, patriotic shine of the Golden Age superhero had already worn off. When Condis speaks of the *Gravity's Rainbow* as "a Golden Age story with a Bronze Age sensibility" (1173), she is referring to Pynchon's choice of superheroes—mainly from the Golden Age of Comics, from the late 1930s till the mid-1950s—as being out of touch with the counterculture of the Bronze Age of Comics, which portrayed more flawed

heroes struggling with darker, more personal issues concerning the social and political upheaval that was 1970s America (1171).

The superhero genre, and comic books in general, have been dismissed as a lowbrow artform since its rise in popularity in the early twentieth century. Pynchon's inclusion of their fantastical characters within his long paragraphs of scientific, technological, philosophical and political theories and critiques is a defiant celebration of the mixing of the low and high arts that "seeks to penetrate all interfaces that seem to separate […] the two cultures of arts and science" (Moore 3). Moore argues that the art of fiction and the art of science are neither in opposition to one another, nor mutually exclusive in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Instead, they inform and support each other. The absence of a verified scientific explanation behind, for example, Slothrop's erectile predictions, gives credence to alternative theories that are, in the novel, demonstrably possible. Pointsman, a behaviourist scientist looking for "a physiological basis for what seems very odd behaviour" (Pynchon 105), dismissively suggest telepathy to Roger Mexico, despite working with colleagues who are "clairvoyants and mad magicians, telekinetics, astral travelers, gatherers of light" (46). Pointsman's determination to empirically demystify the supernatural powers in the natural human body results in him religiously adhering to his blind faith in Pavlovian science, unknowingly blending fiction and science instead of separating them.

By analysing *Gravity's Rainbow*'s postmodern (de)mythologizing of the superman in conjunction with Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), this thesis aims to explore the role of enlightened fiction in post-enlightened society. *Dialectic*'s focus on only the negative consequences of enlightenment has been criticised for being "incapable of appreciating the egalitarian impulses generated by the Enlightenment" (Bronner 5). Adorno and Horkheimer would later soften their stance, stating in the 1969 new edition preface that "we do not stand by everything we said in the book in its original form" because

it "would be incompatible with a theory which attributes a temporal core to truth instead of contrasting truth as something invariable to the movement of history" (xi). *Dialectic* would nonetheless go on to become a central work in the Frankfurt School's critical theory and "caught the imagination of students and intellectuals in the 1960s and 1970s" (Held 13), inspiring, among others, the New Left countermovement. Pynchon's 1966 essay "A Journey into the Mind of Watts", a sympathetic look back on the racially charged Watts riots the year prior and its lasting effects on the African American community, was considered proof of "Pynchon's new-leftist credentials" (Ashe 61). It is not the aim of this thesis to consider the merits of *Dialectic*, but rather its possible influence on Pynchon's postmodern writing.

In the first chapter I will explore the concept of the unacknowledged mythologizing of science as laid out in *Dialectic*, with focus on the coexistence of science and myth; the science of power; and the culture industry. The second chapter will then turn to the postmodern novel, and how challenging literary conventions exposes both the truth and myth of humanity in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Chapter three will first outline the public opinion of the comic book superhero throughout the first half of the twentieth century and then return to *Gravity's Rainbow* to demonstrate the making and breaking of conventional superheroes by comparing protagonist Slothrop to the novel's Superman.

By All Means, Enlighten Us: The Myth of Science

Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at

liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened

earth is radiant with triumphant calamity. Enlightenment's program was the disenchantment

of the world. It wanted to dispel myths, to overthrow fantasy with knowledge.

- Adorno & Horkheimer, *Dialectic*

Adorno and Horkheimer argue that, rather than inspiring critical individual thinking, the

"tireless self-destruction of enlightenment hypocritically […] compels thought to forbid itself

its last remaining innocence regarding the habits and tendencies of the *Zeitgeist*" (xiv). Both

Jewish intellectuals and philosophers of the Frankfurt School, Adorno and Horkheimer

viewed the rise of fascism and Nazism as an inevitable outcome of enlightenment. Instead of

providing a means by which to challenge the establishment, enlightened reasoning only

superficially did away with traditional modes of authority, like the Church, by undermining

religious interpretations through scientific explanation. In doing so, enlightenment

unintentionally passed the mask of infallibility on to the scientific community, which is not

immune to corporate and political interference.

The ancient aphorism that states knowledge is power stems from the original Latin

phrasing "*scientia potentia est*", which ties the concept of knowledge specifically to that of

science. Science is at the core of the enlightenment—carried on well after the actual Age of

Enlightenment—which seeks to free humanity from its self-imposed ignorance by way of

replacing infallible religious dogma with irrefutable scientific facts. By explaining away

beliefs and myths through the investigating and compartmentalizing of the natural world,

enlightened thinking claims to provide the individual with the barebone facts they need to

encourage critical thinking. The influence of science has trickled down to the individual, but not as unbiased as enlightenment would have one believe since "science directs our perceptions and feeling whether we know it or not" (Poirier 157). Science offered answers to the Unknown; answers which were previously exclusively provided by religious texts and teachings meant to assuage fear. As enlightenment answered the seemingly illogical in a logical manner "humans believe[d] themselves free of fear" (Horkheimer et al. 11) which encouraged "demythologization" (idem). What cannot be explained by science, then, is dismissed because anything that "does not conform to the standard of calculability and utility must be viewed with suspicion" (3). This non-negotiable approach to the absence of empirical evidence, and its unwillingness and inability to critique itself—wilfully blind to the idea that its belief in the truthfulness of science is just as dogmatic as religious authority's belief in holy texts—has led Adorno and Horkheimer to posit that "ruthless toward itself, the Enlightenment has eradicated the last remnant of its own self-awareness" (2). Since it does not have to acknowledge alternative thoughts it is free "to develop unhampered by external oppression" (3) such as opposition on moral grounds. Or, as Pirate Prentice explains to Mexico in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the We-system of the preterites versus the They-system of the Elect (Pynchon 756) in which They "refuse to look beyond their own imposed system. If it cannot be connected to the hierarchy 'They' have installed, it does not exist for them, thus creating a neat, but inherently flawed, totality" (Herman and Petrus 177). Enlightenment has thus effectively become "totalitarian" (Horkheimer et al. 4), and, like a dictator, it knows "[human beings] to the extent that [it] can manipulate them. The man of science knows things to the extent that he can make them" (6): the science of eugenics was at the core of Nazi ideology and was used to justify the atrocities carried out by the Third Reich.

Tracing the origins of myth back to tribal antiquity, however, lead Adorno and Horkheimer to the conclusion that while enlightened thinking claims to have done away with

the primitive tradition, in actuality "myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology" (xviii): consider the enlightened reasoning that lead to eugenics and genocide advocated by the Nazis, which was merely propaganda generated to fuel the myth of Aryan *Übermensch* superiority and self-preservation. Adorno and Horkheimer's distrust of the blind acceptance of enlightened science was shared by their fellows at the Frankfurt School, which was "largely comprised of Marxist or neo-Marxist German Jewish émigrés who fled from Nazi Germany in the 1920s and 1930s" (Regalado 152) who were all too familiar with the use of "mass culture to galvanize people behind sinister political agendas" (idem).

The spread of such propaganda was facilitated by the technological revolution of the twentieth century that introduced the radio and later the television to a wide audience. Unlike the telephone, which "liberally permitted the participant to play the role of subject" (Horkheimer et al. 95), the radio "democratically makes everyone equally into listeners, in order to expose them in authoritarian fashion to the same programs" (idem). Disputing Kant's championing of enlightenment as "the human being's emancipation from its self-incurred immaturity" (Kant 17), Adorno and Horkheimer maintain that "knowledge, which is power, knows no limits, either in its enslavement of creation or in its deference to worldly masters" (2) and will always be wielded by those in power. Instead, the culture industry, driven by enlightened technological advancement and controlled by corporations, "affords the technical apparatus and the social groups controlling it a disproportionate advantage over the rest of the population" (xvii), thereby keeping the individual in a state of immaturity. The television, capable of both audio and, more impressionably, visual broadcasting, would only further this one-sided, non-dialectic interaction between authority and consumer. While they "did not see the origin of social and economic injustice in capitalism but in science and Western rationality itself" (McMillian 33), Adorno and Horkheimer coined the term 'culture industry' to refer to the standardization of cultural entertainment provided by the media that prioritise

profit over quality, resulting in the overproduction of easy to digest low artforms, like radio

dramas and soap operas, rather than high intellectual art that encourages the consumer to

think.

Inactions Have Consequences: The Myth of Character

There is nothing more eighteenth-century than Pynchon's love of picaresque plot-accumulation, his mockery of pedantry which is at the same time a love of pedantry, his habit of making his flat characters dance for a moment on stage and then whisking them away

- James Wood, *How Fiction Works*

Criticism of postmodernism has grappled with the question of what "kind of characterization that we may expect in texts that are considered to be Postmodernist" (Bertens 139). Some accuse the movement of refusing "to commit itself to psychological causality and presents characters as unknowable" (140) while others argue the postmodern character "is neither unknowable nor inconsistent and gratuitous, but simply absent" (idem). Those who do detect the presence of the self in maximalist writing feel "its impact on novelistic characterization has been [...] to flatten characters in the process of ontological reduction in which they are rendered static and mechanical" (Gregson 3). Even though it has been acknowledged that E.M. Forster's distinction of 'flat' and 'round' characters is flawed—since "'fully roundedness' takes for granted that human personality is complex, coherent, substantial and capable of endless development" (Gregson 4)—and that postmodern characters are "rarely simply caricatural" (Bertens 146), critics still rely "upon the nineteenth-century's definition of character" (Richer 27). The castigation of Pynchon's characters is unfair, according to Richer, because in lacking a "core self, a fixed identity" (29) characters like Slothrop are able to "fulfil [...] roles simultaneously" (29), citing as example his status as both the systemic victimised and the amorous victimizer (34). His mythologized stint as Rocketman, "the greatest preterite super-hero of the postmodern world" (Stevens 47) begins soon after a bleak

episode of self-pity in which Slothrop's heart tell him "You are no knightly hero" (Pynchon 443). Others point out that instead of "focussing on character—the darling of realist and modernist fiction—Pynchon focuses on humanity, a very different concept" (Hume 252). To survive the System, characters in *Gravity's Rainbow* take on various identities and disguises. This swapping of identities, however, sometimes backfires, like Major Marvy unknowingly pulling on the wanted Slothrop's pig suit, which ends in him mistakenly being castrated (Pynchon 721) and unable to procreate.

Reading allows us to engage with a diverse cast of characters conceived from an author's mind and our recognition of their humanity, regardless of reality, encourages emotional investment in their stories. However, the influence of Freudian psychoanalysis on literary criticism at the turn of the twentieth century brought with it an interest to dissect, study and sort the fictional self in an attempt to explain the human condition in general, leading Walcutt to comment that "the actions of modern fiction have diminished the self about as much as the insights of psychology do" (302). Whereas colourful Dickensian characters were once defined by their mannerisms and quirks, personality traits in contemporary criticism have been "so thoroughly explored and defined and catalogued by the psychoanalysts that they cannot be seen any more as individual eccentricities" (Walcutt 305). Despite Slothrop's unprecedented penile predictions, *Gravity's Rainbow*'s Edwin Treacle, "that most Freudian of psychical researches, thinks [the] gift is psychokinesis" (Pynchon 100) and that the usual Freudian diagnosis of unresolved childhood sexuality may still apply. In the end, however, Treacle and his team's work collapse as they find themselves "at odds with their own minority, the psychoanalytic wing of Psi Section" (328) because of their refusal to stray from "a Freudian, not to mention Jungian frame of mind" (329). This self-destruction is the result, as previously argued by Adorno and Horkheimer, of enlightened sciences like psychoanalysis becoming inflexible and shattering under their own reasoning.

Assuming the average reader does not approach *Gravity's Rainbow* with a comprehensive understanding of Freudian theory, what methods does he or she then employ to get a read on the characters? Caracciolo argues it should not fall to the psychologist but to the reader to "invest fiction with value" (22), but, as Walcutt points out, we read stories of fictional people because "we expect to learn something from them" (5). As laymen, we employ our "folk psychology" (Caracciolo 19) to understand and thereby conceivably know the minds of those that do not exist by treating them as we would real life strangers: "our knowledge and impressions of real people in our daily lives, with the exception of close family and friends, is fragmentary, incomplete" (Hume 11), but this does not stop us from forming "a mental image of a 'complete' human being out of fictional fragments that are provided is precisely our own prior experience with people" (11). This technique of identifying with the other is then extended to the reading of fictional people because to us "even behind the 'flattest possible characters' looms the whole humanistic tradition, the belief in psychological depth and the existential self" (Hoffman 424). The reader does not need science to recognize humanity in the characters.

Because fictions are meant to "foster cooperation by engaging and attuning our social and moral emotions and value […] by enticing us to think beyond the immediate in the way our minds are most naturally disposed" (Boyd 383), it is easy to tap into our sense of, if not sympathy, then moral righteousness by, for example, setting the characters up against a seemingly insurmountable obstacle: the injustice of social struggles is a universal concept shared by the wider public, even if the details differ, or are not even real, because "at the heart of sympathetic experience is a judgment of the unfairness or unpleasantness of another's situation" (Sklar 48). In comparison with Superman's apathetic reaction to his failure to stop the rocket launch (Pynchon 892), Slothrop, "a Saint George after the fact" (28), is frustrated and upset at being unable to stop the "Beast" (28) that is the V2 rocket.

"Slothrop, no hero, arrives too late to battle it" (Weisenburger 32) and, feeling otherwise helpless, prays "for life to win out" (Pynchon 28) until he realizes the futility of his hope for and belief in God to save them from the incomprehensible destruction caused by science. His praying is a fearful yet humane response to uncertainty and evokes Adorno and Horkheimer's argument on the reliance of myth and belief in face of the Unknown (11).

It is not necessarily a character's strife that defines them, but, as it has been long argued, their actions and reactions to their situation and condition. As Boyd points out, "Aristotle places plot first" (223) in *Poetics* because he believed plot, the timeline of events that happen to a character, is what drives them to action, and it is only through their responsive actions that the character comes to life. Actions require decision making, the considering of choices, which in turn requires intellect and thereby a developed human mind. In the postmodern narrative of *Gravity's Rainbow*, where the consequences of both action and inaction are not always obvious and do not always materialise, "Slothrop's freedom [still] depends upon him taking responsibility for his actions. He cannot blame all his actions upon Them" (Stevens 42) and yet his "inability to face the responsibilities that accompany freedom causes [him] to cling to an illusion of powerlessness" (Condis 1169), like Kant's immature populace who prefer the comfort of a controlled system over the uncertain consequences of acting against it. However, Pynchon's world is one of paranoia, which is "tacitly predicated on belief in cause-and-effect [which] inhibits action and results in a stasis which is not transcendence" (Ozier 196) while time marches on. Under Gavin Trefoil's autochromatic skin, a wise old nerve cell tells its young cell mate that "[o]ur history is an aggregate of last moments" (Pynchon 176) while, from beyond the natural world, the spirit of Walter Rathenau's warns the Elect through the medium Sachsa that "[a]ll talk of cause and effect is secular history, and secular history is a diversionary tactic. Useful to you, gentlemen, but no longer so to us here" (198). Those who are outside Their controlled system prove that the

chronological notion of causality is not irrefutably set in stone. Indeed, Their science created

the V2 rockets that "explode[s] first [and] then you hear them coming in" (27). In order to

explain and control nature, science has done the seemingly inexplicable.

Whereas the modernist approach to characterization was to psychologically dissect

the character in hopes of finding existential answers to their struggle before putting them

back together again, postmodernism's worldview is "the product of a long process of

secularization and dehumanization" (Fokkema 82) that presents the character, and their

world, as fractured as "the uniquely fragmented nature of much contemporary experience"

(Barry 32). Throughout *Gravity's Rainbow* this "encyclopedic tendency […] based upon the

human urge to summarize and organize the information pertaining to the world around us"

(Herman and Petrus 169) produces lengthy enlightened passages that are both scientific as

well as mythological: after several pages containing technological, industrial and historical

references, the pursuit of the prophetic Byron the Bulb by the Phoebus lightbulb cartel

(Pynchon 766-776) ends on a sadomasochistic religious note of the "poor perverse bulb"

(776) finding pleasure in the anger of his own helplessness building up inside him. Pynchon's

employment of maximalist writing, "a novelistic genre produced by the systematic

interference of the modernist aesthetic code by that of the postmodern" (Ercolino 253),

characterised by lengthy digressions, tons of metafictional references and excessive attention

to details, is barely used to report on the establishment, let along the growth of the characters

as characters. Indeed, it would seem only to serve to further confound the reader by providing

too much information on everything but characterization, and the manner in which treats the

rest of its inflated narrative—with postmodernist irony and self-awareness—stands in

opposition of its critics' desire for fiction "to seriously address the contemporary crisis, yet

remain free of epistemological and formalistic reflection" (Bogue 129). That is not to say that

fictional worlds that have "unique and specific spacetime[s]" (Gomel 14) are inherently

lacking in credibility, but the more far-removed they are from ours, the more the reader will rely on "some baseline of narrative normally" (idem). Since the 1960s, the "ontological status of fictional worlds [and] their relationship with the actual world" (Wolf 7) has raised the question of how much of a narrative's verisimilitude relies on the author's input, and how much on the reader's. New and foreign concepts are presented with a degree of recognizability at the author's discretion, but rather than accept their incomplete presentation as is, the reader will automatically attempt to construct a "more vivid representation through the import of information provided by […] cultural knowledge, including knowledge derived from other texts" (Ryan 92). The postmodernist world and its worldview are fractured "within a larger textual universe" (176), held together by no obvious means or reason, which drives the suspicion of paranoia that is so prevalent to the genre (Ercolino 107). The reader must rely heavily on their ability to recognize "a system of correspondences across the textual fabric" (Dannenberg 168) using real-world cognitive equivalences, but undermining this whole attempt is "one aspect of historiographic metafiction's antirealist agenda" (idem).

Taking the creative literary liberty to merge our world with either a contemporary or future alternate reality (or both) mostly goes unchallenged. When fiction is retroactively applied to history, however, controversy may arise. There is something sacred about history that should not be altered. Historiographic metafiction does not challenge the adage that history cannot be rewritten on the grounds that what has been cannot be undone: it posits that, having been written in the first place, history it is a narrative account that is "always already textualized, always already interpreted" (Hutcheon 143) and that that makes it, along with fiction, "discourse[s], human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity" (93). By setting *Gravity's Rainbow* during and after World War II, Pynchon makes use of these analogical connections to tie the chaos of the end of the war with the cultural and political upheaval of 1960s America. By evoking the past to

contextualise the then-present, he alters it, thereby conflating "reality and fiction, […] authenticity and falsification, […] historiography and fiction" to erase the borders between real history and Pynchon's alternate (Dannenberg 230), despite the novel, in typical postmodernist fashion, repeatedly reminding the reader it is intentionally doing so.

While maximalist overwriting risks slowing the narrative's momentum down to the point of boring some readers (Hägg 78), the imparting of a large and diverse amount of information can still enrich and inform a text, providing "background richness and verisimilitude (Wolf 2) even if it does not advance the plot. This is especially relevant in Pynchon's historiographic metafiction, in which he weaves his own fictional spin on history; creating an alternate timeline familiar enough to the reader that the narrative need not simply dryly repeat past events. Instead, with a recognizable historical framework already landmarking the narrative's setting, *Gravity's Rainbow* uses it to continuously remind the reader that they are in a fictional world by "directly referring us back to the real one […] in Pynchon the factuality seems willingly to participate in the fiction" (Poirier 156). Caught in a drug-induced stupor that starts with him stuck in a toilet in the Roseland Ballroom, Slothrop is on the literal brink of a metaphysical adventure as he tries desperately to escape being gangraped by a young Malcolm X and his cronies (Pynchon 74-75): by combining Malcolm X's serious autobiographical accounts of his childhood—which revealed he'd moved to Roxbury at a young age to work as both a shoeshine boy and a prostitute—with the literal shit adventures of Slothrop, Pynchon interlaces fact and fiction; high art with low.

Holding Out for a Hero: The Myth of the Superman

> Oh, we can beat them, forever and ever
>
> Then we can be heroes, just for one day
>
> We can be heroes
>
> We can be heroes
>
> -David Bowie, "Heroes"

The theme of superheroes in *Gravity's Rainbow* WWII settings is not as unexpected as one might think. Pynchon is not simply writing them into history for shock or entertainment value. The mass appeal of the comic book, that lowly artform, made it a useful medium to boost morale and patriotic support during the Depression and the inevitable threat of war. While Nazi propaganda perpetuated the enlightened myth of the *Übermensch*, the United States propagated its own ideals by countering the barbaric figure of eugenics with "the gods and goddesses [of its own] uniquely American mythology (Condis 1170): the superhero. Born out of need for "excitement, distraction, and relevance in the midst of Depression-era America" (Regalado 17), comic books were cheap and available media of escapism that spanned several genres, most popularly the detective and the mystery, with protagonists who were cast as "effective and optimistic agents of change who stood a chance of transforming the world for the better" (Regalado 193). Debuting in 1938, Superman altruistically aligned himself, not with the government, but with the value of truth, justice and the American way. In the wake of WWII, however, he and other Golden Age superheroes "became an integral part of the propaganda machine used to convince a sceptical populace that U.S. participation in the conflict was necessary" (idem). Though the War devasted Europe and Asia, it appealed

to the fantasy of the "Depression-age youth" (Regalado 187) who sought to "make their way into the American Dream of economic prosperity and material success" (idem) their patriotic heroes were shown enjoying in their stories. As well as pro-war propaganda, comic books kept the masses both entertained and too preoccupied to question the ethics and involvement in the conflict in Europe. In fact, Hitler's accusation that Superman was "a Jew […] pushed all the comics publishers into the interventionist column well before the United States became actively involved" (Dittmer 10), countering the Nazi *Übermensch* with supermen of their own.

The American Superman, however, does not stem from distant myth, but shares his origin with his German counterparts that can be traced back to "the contemporary superhero character type [that is] a product of the British and American eugenics movements of the early twentieth century" (Gavaler, *Well-Born* 182) which sought to produce, through selective reproduction, the perfect human being; the super man. Citing Baroness Orcyz's hero the Scarlet Pimpernel, first debuting in 1905, Gaveler examines the elitist origin of the superhero character. A vigilante parading as a foppish aristocrat during the French Revolution, his self-appointed mission is to "rescue the ruling class by metaphorically blending [his] identities with the objects of their fear" (idem), the lower class, in order to move unseen among them. The supermen were meant to embody and protect the upper echelon of society, not the preterites. By the turn of the Golden Age of Comics, however, "the supermen abandoned eugenics to defend the egalitarian principles the movement opposed" (183) by using their powers to right the wrongs of society and to protect the most vulnerable instead of the most privileged. While "not directly responding to eugenics […] its pseudo-science provided the name and the cultural foundation" (idem) for early comic book creators to come. The superman on both sides of the Atlantic stemmed from the myth of enlightened science and was used to propagate national myths of principles and

righteousness. Whereas Germany emphasized science—specifically, eugenics—to validate their Aryan heroes, American comic book heroes were incorporating more and more mythological elements into their patriotic arsenal as sales and demand increased.

After WWII, however, "the Cold War transformed the contours of modernity and created new economic, social, political, and existential anxieties" (Regalado 150) that once again threatened to destabilize American society. Comic books, which had adopted the rhetoric of pro-war hypermasculinity during the 30s and 40s, now proved problematic in "a postwar era characterized by fear of deviance from societal norms" (157) because the superhero was "inherently and aggressively subversive, transgressive, independent, and untamed" (idem). Anti-comics crusader Frederic Wertham, author of *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) and a fellow Frankfurt intellectual of Adorno and Horkheimer, shared their sentiments that "mass culture [produced] mass societies of passive zombies programmed to follow the dictates of the mainstream" (153). Wertham in particular "believed that the very nature of superhero comic books challenged the seriousness of high culture, taking liberties with both science and the humanities for the sake of entertainment" (154): having been used as propaganda to counter German propaganda did not elevate them above the Nazi's manipulation of mass culture and media. Instead, comic books were now, in Wertham's opinion, on par with the tools Hitler's regime had used to influence and control individual rights and thoughts.

The movement against the comic book industry also drew "on earlier critiques that negatively linked comic books to alleged lower-class vulgarity and subversive behaviour" (145) in an attempt to censor or outright ban publications. To appease the anti-comic movement, creators "responded to criticism by realigning the contours of characters […] to conform to the dictates of Cold War culture. Consequently, superheroes survived the assault, remaining one of the more culturally viable vehicles for publishing in the medium by the late

1950s" (146). However, this came at the cost of the characters and what they symbolized—independent thinkers and doers—as they were once again "on the side of established authority" (Regalado 168), encouraging the masses to conform to the status quo. The intellectual and creative value of comic books is "difficult to recognize because comics employ an unpopular visual rhetoric associated with children's stories" (Lioi 174), though this too was an issue with critics who "defined intelligence according to the refinement of aesthetic taste. As such, they served to create and preserve notions of highbrow and lowbrow culture" (Regalado 147) and feared the mass consumption of lowbrow comics would be detriment to the development of the youth.

By the 1960s, however, organized comic fandoms, known as fanzines, challenged this stereotype of the culturally ignorant comic book reader who shunned intellectual properties in favour of lowbrow entertainment. On the contrary "comic book fans [in a] fervor to contextualize their favorite comic book superheroes […] delved into academic sources in other ways, writing essays on a broad range of mythological, historical, and literary texts" (171-2), a cultural phenomenon which even Wehtram would come to appreciate, though he did not renege on his stance of whether the comic book is an artform in its own rights.

It is in the 1960s when the postmodern superhero, born from enlightened myth of science, produced and distributed by the culture industry, and simultaneously beloved and dismissed by the general public, appears as yet another interpretation in Pynchon's writing. A comic book fan himself, Pynchon takes his contextualization of superheroes in contemporary culture to acclaimed heights in *Gravity's Rainbow* in unexpected ways. Combining science and myth in an encyclopaedic narrative held together by paranoia, the plot may resemble "a Golden Age superhero story in that it follows a team of Allied troops who demonstrate special abilities during World War II" (Condis 1171), but nothing in Pynchon world—even a

description that short—is so simple. There is no cliched hero who saves everyone at the end of the day and flies off into the sunset.

The introduction to *Gravity's Rainbow* heroes is hardly spectacular. The reader may be forgiven if he or she assumes twenty or so pages in that Pirate Prentice is to be the protagonist. His first appearance involves barely avoiding getting crushed by Bloat (Pynchon 5) and then picking bananas on his roof for his famed—and comically named—Banana Breakfast (7-8). A few pages later, it is revealed he can somehow enter other people's dreams and once fought "*a giant Adenoid*" (17). This shift from his morning routine to battling supernatural monsters; from the categorical to the illogical, is familiar as it follows the conventions of the superhero—an everyday everyman with hidden special abilities—setting up Prentice to be the story's main character. In comparison, the first mention of Slothrop is in name only, and it is not a flattering portrayal: his desk is incredibly cluttered, and he is "a faithful reader" (21) of *News of the World*. Like Prentice, Slothrop's first physical appearance is that of the unassuming military man, though he is less collected, shivering in the cold and later shaking in the club in fear of the new V2 rockets while avoiding two one-night stands. Unlike Prentice, whose telepathic powers is common yet powerful superhero ability, Slothrop's is absurd in its uniqueness: "a sneaky *hardon* stirring, ready to jump" (31) in anticipation of a V2 impact. It is the sort of lowbrow humour not even found in mainstream comic books, yet it is the prevailing mystery—and possible answer—surrounding his sensitivity to the plastic Imipolex G used in manufacturing the V2s. He could, technically, more so than even Superman himself, save the day, if he only understood his powers.

While Slothrop may possess supernatural ability to save the world, his indecisiveness and inability to refrain from pleasurable distractions leads to his own disintegration into nothingness, passing into legend and myth after disappointedly falling "victim to self-policing" (Condis 1180). Rather than liberate himself from Them using the very powers They

imbued him with, Slothrop still fears and "believes in the power of science to bring the world under its rule of rationality, to the point that he begins to doubt his own ability to escape" (1178) the web of conspiracies. It could be argued that perhaps Slothrop is not meant to be a superhero, but one of the metahumans, who "are not all heroes; not all use their powers to serve" (Lioi 173). Lioi goes on the differentiate the metahuman from the superhero as a being who possesses superpowers, be it from birth, by accident, or through scientific experimentation. Though the latter can be linked back to eugenics, the metahuman "represent a populist revision of Nietzsche's idea of the person who transcends the limits of humanity" (idem) yet "they struggle with the meaning of the beyond" (idem). *Gravity's Rainbow* boasts a wide roster of original metahumans, including the cheekily named Floundering Four (Pynchon 800), as well as acknowledging iconic real-world heroes like Wonder Woman (801), Submariner and the original Plasticman (892). None of them, however, step in to help in the fight against Them. By demand of the anti-comic activists, they had been rewritten to comply with the passive, conventional norms of the 50s and 60s. The heroes of Pynchon's childhood had become agents of the System, in both our world and Pynchon's. But rather than free them from these restrictions in the pages of *Gravity's Rainbow*; rather than have Superman effortlessly catch up with and stop Rocket 00000 like we know he can, Pynchon introduces him in the same light as he did Slothrop at the start of the novel. Like Slothrop, Superman is "a Saint George after the fact" (28), arriving too late and, even more uncharacteristically unheroic, not caring nor accepting responsibility for his failure. The romance of the heroic knight in shining armour is dead. A Golden Age hero who soared on patriotic propaganda and American values during WWII in the real world, he has been thoroughly demythologized in *Gravity's Rainbow*, exposing the myth behind the enlightened science that gave birth to the superman: it is all fiction.

Conclusion

I wrote this thesis based on the general academic consensus—though it is not entirely uncontested—that Pynchon's political stance leans favourably to the left, though whether it is as extreme as the New Left remains an issue up for debate given that he himself has never voiced or written any overt political opinion or manifesto. "A Journey into the Mind of Watts" is more a humanist commemoration than a partisan attack. He is more critical of the socio-economic hardships of minorities, and the overbearing presence of law enforcement in their communities: a serious social issue that the American government, regardless whether the sitting president was a Democrat or a Republican, failed time and time again to resolve. Given his year of birth, the start of his writing career in the 60s, and his prolific infusion of postmodern counterculture that opposes capitalist, industrial and military institutions in his work, it is safe to say he is in any case not conservative. Then again, nor is Pynchon politically correct, which has garnered criticism from the progressive left as well.

Anyone hoping to research Pynchon will not be in want of secondary sources. Over the past half century his work has been studied and debated. Pynchon, in his reclusive nature, is not a writer who will sit down with scholars and admirers and explain his works. In the absence of clear authoritative and authorial answers, readers have formed their own interpretations, both in amateur online communities as in academic circles. This mystery, this myth, surrounding the inner workings of Pynchon's mind may never be empirically proven, but his refusal to lay down the law concerning his stories encourages creative thinking rather than oppresses it. He does not neatly identify or categorize or even chronologize his characters and storylines. He simply puts it all out there for the reader to observe, consider and question. In a way, Pynchon himself exemplifies enlightenment done right.

It therefore struck me as surprising how little information I could find on Pynchon and the enlightenment, as discussed in *Dialectic*. Given the timing of his writing of *Gravity's Rainbow* (and previous books) and the influence of Adorno and Horkheimer on the counterculture of the period, I was expecting to struggle to find a niche in this area, only to find—in my admittedly limited online search as I could not access plenty of databases—no articles directly linking either authors or works. It is not that the term enlightenment has never been brought up among Pynchon admirers, but the research that has been conducted centred more on the concept of spiritual enlightenment in his novels, rather than the enlightened science that lived well past the Age of Enlightenment. I could not go as in depth as I could have but given how much I had to leave out of this thesis for the sake of length there is future potential for more thorough research and analysis of enlightened criticism in Pynchon's work.

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