

Historical Anomie and the Crisis of Identity in Thomas Pynchon's Novels*

Ecaterina PĂTRAȘCU

Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences

Al. I. Cuza University Iași

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Abstract: Thomas Pynchon's novels analyzed in this article – *V., The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow* – bring in the limelight preoccupations typical for the postmodern American novel: the anomie of history, the maladive reality, sterile imagination, with direct consequences on the construction of identity. The approach to these concerns is interdisciplinary, the postmodern concepts of relativism, arbitrary meaning, subjectivity, constructed reality, (his)story and interchangeable interpretations being identified and delineated both in philosophy and literary theory. Perceived from the perspective of quantum physics, historicism in Pynchon is entirely subjective; the organizing structures of history are only products of one's imagination, therefore the anomie and the accidental indubitably govern it. The general impression is that of a paranoid state of mind that evolves from a personal (Herbert Stencil and Oedipa Maas) to a cosmic level (Tyrone Slothrop).

E-mail: cati_patrascu@yahoo.com

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Introduction

The defining aspect of the American historical novel in postmodernism and implicitly of Thomas Pynchon's novels consists in the structuring enterprise of a chaotic and indeterminate reality, one in a profound crisis. However, the organizing scenarios suggested by these novelists cannot be discriminated coherently one against the other, the option for one in particular being completely arbitrary since they are all equally plausible. Typically for the postmodern historical novel in America, there is the incapacity of overlapping systems of signification over disparate elements of the real. The historical referent, already textualized, does not have the capacity to model an explicative universe, yet it is able to face a varied number of explanations, even if, or especially if they are contradictory. Beyond the

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appearance of unity granted by the ordering configurations, reality belongs to a world implacably governed by indetermination and arbitrariness.

The first novel discussed in this article, *V.*, exposes reality as depersonalized, in a period of manifest hyper-consumerism, and under the sign of decadence, the inanimate and progressive entropy; the general impression is that of an assemblage of some insignificant, yet iterative incidents. The modalities in which the two main characters, Benny Profane and Herbert Stencil, relate to this reality determine different receptions of the same set of events. Thus, reality is totally amorphous for the former, the systems of significations being long exhausted, while he himself is incapable of projecting any new organizing or significant structure. Reality is the same for Stencil, but he projects coherent structures that – despite failing – are the proof of the character's imaginative capacity. Stencil relates arbitrarily to history, the fictionalization of the past being accomplished by means of totally random reflective acts: ordinary events or minor characters are invested with a significant historical role. Stencil's whole undertaking is characterized by artificiality due to his incapacity to coherently overlap his imaginative projections over the coordinates of reality. The ultimate impression is that his attempt to deny the entropy of history leads, contrarily, to its amplification since history is delineated as totally irrational or already experienced. Pynchon does not suggest any final illumination; searching for meanings proves to be artificial and useless, being as dissipated as the multiple realities it tries to signify.

Similarly to *V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49* also placed in the limelight the debatable relation between real historical data and historico-parodical constructs. Reality is made up of events governed by the possible and the implausible against a background of lacking explicit significations. Pynchon's reality is isolating, thus it hinders authentic communication.

The immediate result is one of cultural entropy, to which the novelist opposes the possibility of authentic communication and restoration of the meaning through an alternative system of correspondence, namely the Tristero System. Besides entropy, reality also functions according to a more dangerous logic, the binary one, surpassing indetermination, multiplicity, and the paradox. Combining two different conceptions of history, the sacred one, associated with the promise of final redemption, and the profane, guided by the arbitrary, is a recurrent operation in Pynchon. Although the Puritan perception of being saved from history is invoked, the lack of any organizing principle transforms history into a continuous process, however, without, triggering a well defined finality. Thus, the arbitrary will become an organizing principle; the profane will replace the sacred, while entropy will replace religion.

The unity of events could be fulfilled by means of a consciousness searching for its own coherence. Oedipa Maas, the protagonist of the novel, uses her imagination to fill in the structural holes of history with suspended hypotheses. However, her counter-entropic efforts do not lead to an understanding of the world, they do not confer meaning and unity to the history in which she lives; on the contrary, these could represent an even greater peril, namely the paranoid closure of the self. As Herbert Stencil in *V.*, Oedipa Maas has the capacity of intuiting the

mystery, the alternative to the nonsense of the external world. Unfortunately, the materialization of the creatively imaginative principle is never fulfilled and his imagination degenerates exponentially with the de-structuring of the world around. The imaginative effort does not generate anything else but more enclaves of meaninglessness. Although, initially, the role of the creative fantasy is to delimit spaces, the process does not continue with their content definition, the imaginative process remaining an artificial and sterile one.

Personal paranoia, exemplified by Herbert Stencil and Oedipa Maas, acquires cosmic dimensions in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, the novel in which the projection of paranoid scenarios is Tyrone Slothrop's responsibility. The concept of reality covers a space which is either chaotically dominated by the arbitrary, or manipulated by obscure forces, according to the "conspiracy theory" pattern. This latter hypothesis relates to the scenario of the structured universe which, however, in Pynchon, lacks the organizing principle. Thus, reality is, in fact, a conglomerate of disparate data on which Slothrop tries to superimpose his coagulating imaginative effort. However, imagination translates by paranoia, as in the case of the other two novels: as the identification effort of an organizing principle increases, so does the number of hypotheses grow and their materialization becomes utopian. As in the case of Oedipa Maas, there are two variants of relating to reality: either you are caught in a conspiracy whose message you cannot read, or you do not belong to any scenario, the risk being the same, namely your death as an individual. History in Pynchon is always apocalyptic: the hypotheses "everything is meaningful" and "everything is meaningless" lead, invariably, to the same extinction. The individual, despite any projected imaginative scenario, beyond all efforts of understanding, can never authentically establish a relation with reality and his history, being doomed to failure.

1. *V.* – the anomie of the signified and the crisis of representation

The overview of the novel is created by the impact of a consumerist reality and of the reifying technologies on the individuals' humanity, the accent falling on the latter's decline to a sterile existence. In *V.*, Pynchon analyzes the epoch of hyper-consumerism, which is characterized by its attachment to the non-human and thus determines the cultural void (the symbol of the street is central to the novel). In such a society, personal meanings are replaced by the power of commodities, thus Pynchon tackling the problematics of the post-human condition and the process of leaning to it. In the same time, one cannot write about *V.* as being a novel which exclusively deals with the orthodox postmodern problematic: it can be considered, at least, a parodic re-reading of some themes which are typical to modernism, such as the order principle, the role of the myth, and transcendence of discontinuity. "*V.* is neither a complete rejection nor a wholesale imitation of modernist literary conventions. Pynchon's example, then, leads us to a view of postmodernism as steering a course in between the opposite poles of continuity and discontinuity with modernism."¹

¹ Maarten Van Delden, "Modernism, the New Criticism and Thomas Pynchon's *V.*," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 2 (1990), 118.

History, in Pynchon's novel, can be known through the impact it produces on the two characters, reflecting itself in their behaviours.

1.1 Benny Profane – the anomie of the person as illustration of the societal anomie

Benny Profane illustrates the condition of the individual caught as if in a trap by the temporal world; in his case, the exhaustion of all systems of meaning represents entering crisis and the end of humankind culture.

Profane illustrates the confrontation with the problems of an alienated existence in a completely anomic world and a disorienting present. He adopts a passive attitude, the "yo-yo man": an object of action, a depersonalized self, a passive presence within the chaos of a transient experience which cannot be either modified, or understood. Profane illustrates the hero – object, passive, amorphous, opposed to the distinctive self, underlying the impossibility of establishing mediation between world, history and individuality. "At the center of *V.* stands the problem of how and where to find a principle of order in the modern world. By dividing his text between two very different characters, Pynchon seems to be balancing against each other two opposite answers to this question. Benny Profane, a young man moving along the fringes of Bohemia in the New York of the mid-1950s, is part of a blatantly and unredeemably disordered world."¹

Profane is a reified being, under the sign of animate deficiency, lacking individualizing traits; he experiments fear of nothingness and fear of his own internal nature externalization: "Profane was afraid of land or seascapes like this, where nothing else lived but himself."² Benny isolates himself from the world and people, but the indifference comes mostly from those around him: "As usual nobody wanted him in particular."³

Profane does not understand anything from his experience in the world; his lack of attachment or involvement in a particular situation and his "yo-yo" attitude justify his distanced passing through the world. However passive he might be, Profane does not manifest tolerance to objects: "inanimate objects and he could not live in peace"⁴, his passivity not implying dehumanization as well. Profane is aware of his solitude both in real life and in his dreams, while his becoming conscious of his own brutalization is associated with the image of a car disassembling: "To Profane, alone in the street, it would always seem maybe he was looking for something too to make the fact of his own disassembly plausible as that of any machine. [...] This was all there was to dream; all there ever was: the street."⁵

Profane associates his identity with destruction and decadence: "'Benny Sfacim is really your name?' said the one in the street. 'Sfacimento.' In Italian it meant destruction or decay."⁶ He asserts his continuity with himself, transforming

¹ Ibid., 118.

² Thomas Pynchon, *V.* (Toronto, New York, London: Bantam Books, 1963), 12.

³ Ibid., 27.

⁴ Ibid., 27.

⁵ Ibid., 30.

⁶ Ibid., 35.

inactivity and the invariable in principles of life; in the same time, he rejects evolution, being accused of transforming this state into a universal principle. Rachel minimizes him completely by labeling him as a commoner, registering him with all the anonymous and thus relativizing his individuality: "You're not a schlemihl. You're nobody special."¹

At a certain moment, Majstral and Profane, after separating from Stencil, return to where they started, to the Street: "both agreed that that was nowhere, but some of us do go nowhere and can con ourselves into believing it to be somewhere."² The two of them return with the disillusion of not having solved the mystery; meanings remain hidden, the two of them returning to the nothingness of the world. Initiation has not taken place, the world has not changed, prey to the same lack of organizing principles or, maybe, heading for total stillness.

1.2 Herbert Stencil – the inefficiency of imagination and the failure of configuring the anomic history

At the opposite end one can identify the other protagonist of the novel, Herbert Stencil: "But if in Profane's world nothing appears to connect with anything else, in Herbert Stencil's world all signs seem to gravitate towards a single, magnetic source. The person at the heart of the all-pervading plot Stencil intuits beneath the surface chaos of twentieth-century history is V., a mysterious woman whose chequered career Stencil has long been trying to reconstruct."³ Stencil postulates the existence of a particular figure, V., the agent of a world conspiracy of dehumanization, the ultimate intrigue which bears no name. The character projects a V structure on history, which confers his existence purpose and identity, the compensation of a depletion of meaning in a culture of crisis, the imposition of a model involving the fictionalization of the world as well.

The theme of searching is parodied since there are no epiphanies or moments of truth, illumination being impossible in a culture of the significant illness.⁴ Stencil is characterized by the attempt to find or produce significant models of coherence and thus to discover his own identity. In the case of both characters, the universe they relate to is the same; what differs is their individual relating to it. The difference between the two protagonists is significantly formulated by Tony Tanner who entitles one of the chapters in his *City of Words*, 'Caries and Cabals'⁵, a collocation he has taken over from Pynchon's novel, from Dudley Eigenvalue, the character who, at a certain moment, analyzes Stencil's psychology: "Cavities in the teeth occur for good reason, Eigenvalue reflected. But even if there are several per tooth, there's no conscious organization there against the life of the pulp, no

¹ Ibid., 359.

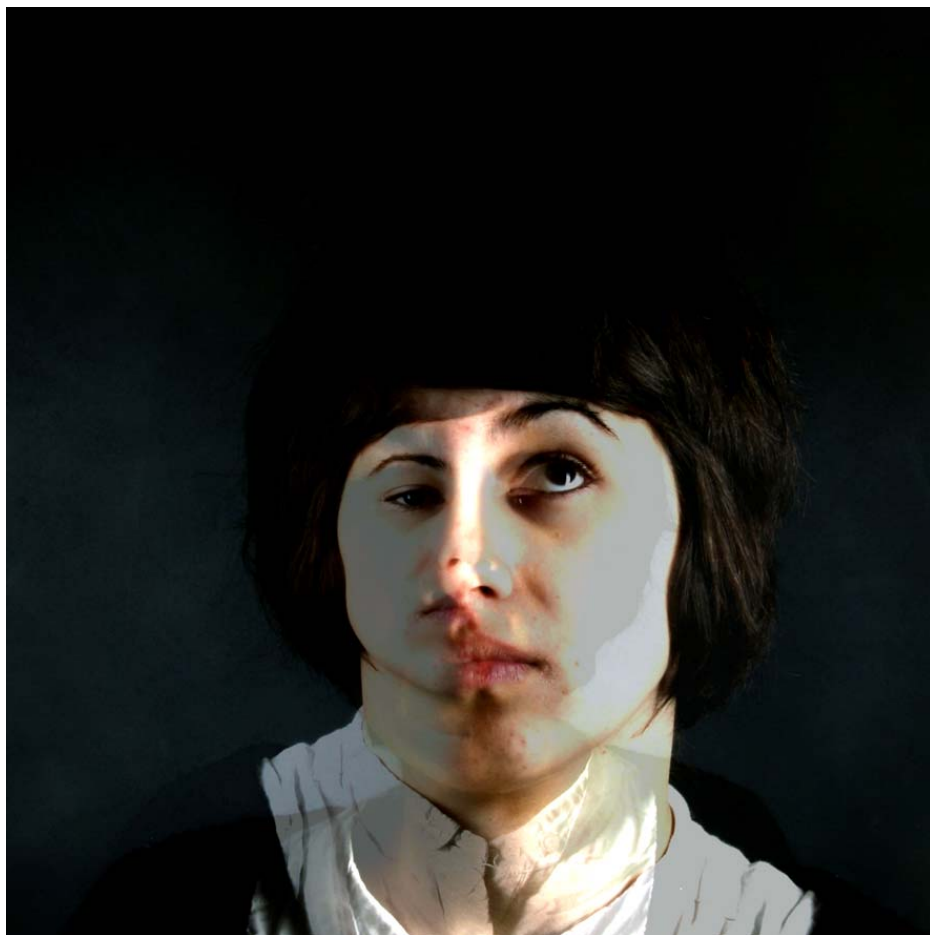
² Ibid., 426.

³ Van Delden, "Modernism, the New Criticism and Thomas Pynchon's *V.*," 118.

⁴ Cf. Paul Maltby, *Dissident Postmodernists* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 240.

⁵ Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971), 153–70.

conspiracy. Yet we have men like Stencil, who must go about grouping the world's random caries into cabals.”¹



Irina Dumitrașcu, *Self Confused 4*

Photography print, 50x50cm, 2009

Website: www.bavardestudio.ro

V. symbolizes the inheritance of the past and Stencil tries to recuperate it, to reconstruct the historical truth with the help of a chequered method of approaching reality. The attempt to obtain a coherent image of events is put into practice by combining various informative data that emanate from the testimonies of some eyewitnesses, fragmentary documents, journals and old files, forgotten postcards, police reports, series of gossips. The findings about V. vary from coherence to unintelligible dispersion, from indisputable identities to heterogeneous places, events, concepts and characters, all suggesting the indetermination both of the search and of the character himself.

¹Pynchon, *V.*, 153.

The searcher starts from the supposition that he can find the meaning and the center of his self as related to a larger model of signification, in a position definable on the map of history; thus, identity is conceived as a function of the historical context. Stencil overlaps configurations that exist only in his imaginative projections on a historical structure characterized by the absence of the model and of the significant organization. His imagination starts by attributing a meaning to history and it fictionalizes the past by acts of arbitrary reflection that offer models for what represents, from a different perspective, only surface accidents of history. Disparate events are turned into real histories.

Stencil's endeavour proves the impossibility of extracting any meaning from history; humanity as presented in the novel is threatened by decadence, annihilation, inanimateness, plot, paranoia, and entropy, while history is an arbitrary accumulation of inert matter and the endless repetition of a number of common, meaningless and irrelevant facts, which proclaims the field of the inanimate world.

Searching for *V.* does not result from Stencil's personal conviction regarding the necessity of the existence and of the discovery of a symbol that designates tradition, history, and the past. His initiatic trajectory does not start and is not triggered by him; it passes right through him and is assumed as a duty, it is his father's inheritance. Stencil, as an individual, confronts himself with the difficulty of his self-definition as a distinct individuality against the reality of the identity crisis. Hence, the depersonalization that he adopts by means of using the third person singular while referring to himself. Indefinite personality, Stencil is in search of something indefinite, the object or the being sought for being assumed as 'the Model' by means of which Stencil wants to impose order, to confer coherence both to the world and to himself. Stencil is the holder of the significant to which he tries to match the signified; however, the latter appears as indeterminate, plural and infinite.

Stencil's failure to find the organizing principle of the world and of himself comes from the appropriation of a concept foreign to him, which does not come from the personal desire and necessity to confer coherence to himself. *V.* represents the 'other', the 'given', the 'form' that must be signified, individualized, and assumed personally, actions that will not take place either because of Stencil's incapacity to significantly understand the world and to define his place within it, or because of the incapacity of the world itself to signify: a dehumanized world, fragmentary, in which 'the reign of quantity' is the only organizing principle. The massification of the animate and the entropic tendency to the final extinction expand to the individuals, becoming routes of their evolution. Both Benny Profane and Herbert Stencil are remnants of the human: the former, indifferent and passive in front of his being overwhelmed by the world, while the latter – detached, trying to mechanically impose patterns on a maladive universe of incoherence.

1.3 The searching process – single law of existence

Stencil's searching process is intellectualized and rational, opposed to the instinctual, the identity of the character building itself around this process; it is not what he will or will not find at the end of his search that influences and structures his individuality, but the searching process itself. Stencil's complexity is given by

the polyvalence of the intuition of *V.* under guises that pertain both to the animate and the inanimate: “He was quite purely He who Looks for V.”¹ Stencil’s endeavour is optimistically interpreted by some exegetes: “Stated more specifically, it is by knowing who V. is, and more specifically still, who V. has become by the present of the book, that the reader will be able to make sense of why things are the way they are at that time. Looked at another way, one-half of the novel (the historical episodes) is devoted to solving the riddle of V., while the other half (the contemporary episodes) is devoted to making use of that solution.”²

V.’s connotations can be enumerated in an open list: a woman, maybe Stencil’s mother; companion to his solitude; object of a passionate desire; object of a bookish search; an adventure of the mind; a mysterious being; his father’s inheritance; image in the paintings of Florence or part of a conspiracy; a place called Vheissu, sometimes considered only an imaginary space, fascinating, dominated by colours; the image of a fool’s kaleidoscope; Venus; Venezuela; the final, nameless plot; Vera Meroving; Valletta, his father’s death place. “In describing Stencil’s quest for V., Pynchon refers to the tradition of *The Golden Bough* or *The White Goddess*, thus linking him explicitly to an earlier generation’s search for an overarching mythical order. The reference, however, is pointedly satirical.”³ By means of satire, Pynchon debases one of the fundamental categories of modern aesthetics, namely that of the myth which can have consolatory valence in an environment subdued to fragmentariness. While “for the modernists, the interest in myth was a way of expressing their belief that there were possibilities for human fulfilment of which the modern world seemed to have lost sight”⁴, the narration in *V.* does not lead, with Stencil’s help, to a unifying transcendence; on the contrary, it anticipates disintegration. The structure that Stencil attempts to project is a dispersed one, the character being unable to organize the elements that he discovers. The desire of searching fades away, namely what really united and conferred coherence and signification to his whole endeavour. Once the only structuring element erased, the will of mystery together with all acquired images decompose and adopt the characteristics of the inanimate world: thus V. can be associated with a simple letter or various objects only. The artificiality of his obsession grows from Stencil’s incapacity to create and organize: “V. was an obsession after all, and such an obsession is a hothouse.”⁵

In addition to this, V. becomes a ‘mythical’ emblem of the dehumanization process that characterizes the course of the anomic history in the 20th century: “In Pynchon’s dark parody, the modernist vision of higher forms of coherence collapses, leaving us with two equally dismaying alternatives: either V. is nothing more than a series of coincidences, or there is indeed some kind of pattern beneath the inconclusive appearances, but it is a pattern that has hardened into a

¹ Ibid., 209.

² Kenneth Kupsch, “Finding V.”, *Twentieth Century Literature* 4 (1998): 436.

³ Van Delden, “Modernism, the New Criticism and Thomas Pynchon’s V.,” 129.

⁴ Ibid., 130.

⁵ Pynchon, *V.*, 419.

Manichaean plot that threatens to result in total annihilation.”¹ Providence and myth confer depth and meaningfulness, while coincidence is not the result of the arbitrary. “V. is a country of coincidence, ruled by a ministry of myth whose emissaries haunt this country’s streets. [...] Only Providence creates coincidence. If the coincidences are real then Stencil has never encountered history at all, but something far more appalling.”² At the opposite end there is history, the field of the arbitrary and of the incidental event.

V.’s search by Stencil represents the prototype of the individual’s attempt to find the meaning and justification of this world. Alienation from time is the only modality by means of which V. can be found and understood, the only way to project signification on the world. Pynchon promotes, however, a philosophy of induration: the characters in V. are not open to this transformation which would imply the annihilation of all processes of life and the negation of history. The trajectory along which the characters and the entire state of the world evolve unfolds as decadence, reification of the self and final extinction.

The materials of historic reference are integrated into the fictional field of the novel as transformed elements of an imaginary world that refers to itself. The extra-literary facts are used functionally: everything is subordinated to the creation of an internal referential signification. The mark of the historical fact is rendered by means of an incoherent reality relating to which the narrative strategies and the intellectual wanderings of the characters are delineated. The relative character of the historical conceptions is proved by the fact that the accumulated materials are filtered through more levels of consciousness; thus, the novel becomes a labyrinth of perspectives.

1.4 Narrativization of historical and individual decadence

Pynchon promotes fictions – consensus about the human interpretation and the coherence of history; these answer the need of the self to prevent wandering in an entropic world of incoherence and thus to discover a historical model in relation to which the self could define his identity. The continuous search is the attempt to negate the entropy of history; ironically, this leads to a greater amplification of entropy.³

The image of the present that annihilates authenticity, meaning and order repeatedly appears in the novel, the concern with the inanimate becoming the characters’ obsession, especially of Benny Profane, who observes the phenomenon by means of which animate entities take the form and structure of the inanimate. Humanity exists in order to be destroyed: Pynchon constantly brings forth the nightmarish invasion of the inanimate which expands from humans, perceived not as individuals but as numbers, to the world around, the society in which they live.

In V. we can still speak about an incompletely dehumanized universe, a remnant of humanity, the last possibilities of existence; reification and destruction have not embraced everything. The process is, indeed, one of decadence, but there

¹ Van Delden, “Modernism, the New Criticism and Thomas Pynchon’s V.,” 136.

² Pynchon, V., 423.

³ Cf. Manfred Pütz, *Fabula identității* (Iași: Institutul European, 1995), 56.

is the possibility of salvation, by opposing resistance (Stencil tries to impose order, a pattern on the disorganized world; in his case one can talk about informational entropy). The existence of facts or objects determines their emotional ordering, provokes reactions and thus their registration in history. The past becomes history due to the emotional connotation of facts in a universe which complies to final stillness and destruction, both covering the animate and the inanimate and in which being equals non-being, obeying the laws of physics, beyond human fantasy.

Pynchon writes about the necessity to convince ourselves about the fact that we are living beings, conscious of our human status. The more we participate in the universal process of decadence, the more dramatic the process of awareness becomes. Thus history is the registering of our dehumanization, of our distancing from authenticity; the characteristics of the living world are transferred to the reified one, the inanimate becoming the centre of the universe, its essential structure.

The uncertainty of existence is not calculated or especially programmed so that the finding of any meaning should not be possible; the characters' trajectory proves a false initiation, there is not something that can be finally discovered, there is no final illumination. The asserted uncertainty pertains to the field of the arbitrary, the condition of the 20th century. As in the case of Stencil who confesses the necessity of search in itself and not that of deciphering V.'s mystery, so the whole humanity is dominated by its own trajectory, without a purpose, without a final illumination.

Humanity is represented by abnormality, by everything that suggests non-humanity. The arbitrary, isolation, the soul lack, solitude, dehumanization, all these represent the nightmare of the previous century: "[...] if the poet were to vanish tomorrow, society would live no longer than the quick memories and the dead books of their poetry. It is the role of the poet, this 20th century. To lie."¹ The poet, the prototype of the saviour, is concerned with covering the insignificant reality with metaphors, thus giving birth to the "great lie", to the image about reality taken over by the others; hence his role in the creation of reality, while his disappearance would mean the disappearance of what is told about the world, of the fiction that is the world itself. Reality exists only by means of the poet's imagination, it exists only as fiction; once the poet's imaginative capacity exhausts, the representation of society and society itself disappear as well. The 20th century stands under the sign of the poet's "lie", under the sign of imagination, history playing only a secondary role.

2. The Crying of lot 49 – "*Bordando el manto Terrestre*"

The concepts tackled with by Pynchon in *The Crying of Lot 49* are: coherence versus incoherence, unity versus fragmentariness, identity versus alienation. There also appears the same preoccupation with history as in the previously discussed novel – the debatable relation between the real historical data and the historico-parodical constructs. The events referred to evolve as governed by the possible and the incredible in a chaotic world, lacking encompassing significations. The historic

¹ Pynchon, *V.*, 305.

content could inspire from documents, but its significance is the debatable function of a consciousness that strives to fulfil its own unity in synthesizing relational acts. The result, however, is the denial of unity, the protagonist going adrift in the diffuse projections of her own self.

2.1 The crisis of the entropic world: standardization, ambiguity and indetermination

History in *The Crying of Lot 49* is perceived under the form of the conflict between the system of American late capitalism and an alternative cultural order:

1. The debased and perverted cultural system; a social order that isolates individuals and creates forms concentrated on themselves, forms of subjectivity that militate against authentic communion and communication, egos closed upon themselves and, from here, the sensation of being trapped in herself (Oedipa and her tendency of evading);

2. the Tristero System: the alienation from the official culture, an alternative modality of communication, the possibility to restore the meaning of a society on the point of cultural entropy, the promise of a process of communication and communion that will unite people authentically.

Congruent to this conflict is the theme of America's "Californization": the impact of technology on economy and the national lifestyle, the age of the computer representing automatization, defective binary logic that becomes, as well, the typical human logic. This determines closure, abolishing the conceptual space of indetermination, multiplicity and paradox. "1 and null. This is how the pairs worked. [...] Another meaning behind what is self-evident, or nothing at all. Either Oedipa in the orbital trance of an authentic paranoia, or a real Tristero. Since either there is a Tristero beyond the appearances of an inherited America, or there is only America and, if there is just America, then she had the impression that the only way to live more and mean something for America was for her to be a foreigner, [...] immersed entirely in her paranoia."¹

In such a *tertium non datur* space, Oedipa cannot conceive or process the coexistence of more plausible interpretations of the signs that reveal to her or which she encounters by chance: "Thus the numerous signs which she encounters may be read as: (a) 'clues' to, or empirical proof of, the objective reality of the Tristero System; (b) random occurrences which, however, she has patterned into a constellation of meaning relevant to her hopes or fears; (c) forgeries 'planted' for her attention as part of a plot against her; (d) forgeries when, however, no plot is intended."² The Tristero system would abolish such a limitative logic, combining the elements that would conform to a polyvalent logic, filling the space of the 'excluded tertium.' This intermediary space represents, moving the discussion into

¹ Thomas Pynchon, *Strigarea lotului 49 (The Crying of Lot 49)* (Bucharest: Editura Univers, 1999), 164.

² Maltby, *Dissident Postmodernists*, 143.

a political context, the territory of the tolerant, liberal debates, exactly what America misses in the 20th century.¹

Applying the concept of thermodynamic entropy has the role to illustrate the tendency towards cultural levelling: communication is abased, modified by the uncertainty or the probability of the message. The concept transposed at the level of the novel is a metaphor for the society of late capitalism characterized by a crisis of the spirit, social and behavioural standardization: the culture of America as perceived by Oedipa is the culture of consumerism, a culture in which communication is diminished and meanings are characterized by routine, conformity and predictability.

Applying the concept of informational entropy in Pynchon's novel is justified by the modality in which messages are encoded in the text so that their improbability could be maximized. There is no final explanation of the generalized confusion, the hypotheses multiplying themselves as the number of revelations and suggestions increases; hence a discourse that maximizes the effects of ambiguity, indetermination and the paradoxical, against any organizing tendency.²

2.2 The paradox of the historical process – the Puritan doctrine and the entropic anomy

For Puritans, Stacey Olster³ explains, the sacred history represents a pre-ordained movement towards redemption; for physicists, the profane history is a predictable movement towards contingency. The two visions entwine in Pynchon, the novelist managing to realize an imaginative transformation of the entropic process – the modality in which both conceptions can be used to explain our present situation. The religious symbolism used here is the carrier of the apocalyptic message, a message which, in Pynchon, means preaching the decay of society. One of the causes of this discomposure of the social system is the loss of vital energy, an entropic disappearance of the essential centripetal forces. Oedipa situates herself at the lowest level of pessimism in her attempt of identity construction.

Pynchon's fiction is concerned with the modality in which history as event may affect culture. History in Pynchon is not a model that endlessly repeats itself: the events projected to retake the previous ones do not match with the intended

¹ Cf. Jerry A. Varsava, "Thomas Pynchon and postmodern liberalism," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 3 (1995): 63.

² On Pynchon as author of *The Crying of Lot 49*, Salman Rushdie stated: "[he] managed to do the necessary connections between the occult and political worlds, and constructed a rich metaphorical framework in which two opposed groups of ideas struggled for the textual and global supremacy: on one hand, entropy (the idea that things fall apart, which we can call 'pessimism', but which is also connected to the profane, democratic spirit), and in the opposite corner, paranoia (the idea that everything has a meaning, a Plan, it's just that we don't know what it is...which we can call 'optimism' because of its opposition to meaninglessness, but which is also linked to the religious, even totalitarian spirit, because meaning, in Pynchon, is in the hands of the hidden adepts)" *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Granta Books, 1991): 269–70.

³ Stacey Olster, *Reminiscence and Re-Creation in Contemporary American Fiction* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), 73.

models, while individuals are drifting more and more away from God, approaching apocalypse (the puritan meaning of history). Despite all this, in Pynchon there is a large number of apocalypses, the denouement of which, however, never takes place and thus history proves to be nothing more than a conglomerate of ultimate moments.

Both in Pynchon and in the Puritans, the process, continuous in time and directed towards salvation, is more important than the end. In Puritan representation, the sacred and the profane histories interact as they successively alternate within the spiral of history, change being inevitable. Pynchon initially designed his work on the Puritan historical model but, there no longer existing any organizing principle, the whole vision heads for a decadent, meaningless movement. Salvation no longer represents the direction; the contingent is the one which governs the evolution of events, the place of the sacred is taken by the profane, while the religious vision on history becomes an entropic one. Meaninglessness characterizes the nature of searches and existence in general, a constant in Pynchon's characters. The alternative to meaninglessness is the restoration of a purpose to the universe, the characters' creation of imaginative constructs (the case of Oedipa Maas).

The entropic theory of history means God's dismissal from the world, the depersonalization of the beginning-and-end idea, the accent on the intermediary process. Both for Pynchon (the entropic history heads for an arbitrary end, the instances of order being just transitory), and for the Puritans (history heads for a structured end, any disorder instance being just a temporary aberration), humanity finds itself in the middle of a process in full development. For Pynchon, progressing to order is valued equally with regressing to chaos. Pynchon suggests a synthesizing of the Puritan salvation and of the entropic contingency into a new theory of history (elaborated and applied in his other novel, *Gravity's Rainbow*): our history can simultaneously lead to a structured end and to an unstructured one.¹

2.3 Oedipa Maas – fighting entropy by the self's paranoid closure

Crying of Lot 49 is the fictitious biography of a consciousness confronted with history, rather than a historical novel. For Pynchon, man is a being subjected to time; hence, the partiality of perspectives, the impossibility of his characters, including Oedipa Maas, to develop an overview of the whole reality process.

What identifies Oedipa Maas is the desire to become an agent of coherence and this explains her search for a systematic reference frame and her effort to fill in the structural holes of history with diverse hypotheses. Searching for a coherent historical universe, as in the case of Herbert Stencil, implies approaching a large number of historical events that could eventually form a satisfactory pattern; Oedipa and Stencil are prisoners of the situations they themselves try to organize. However, the individual fight for order and structure cannot be extended over the entire world since it does not have objective validity in the environment around. The concern for entropy manifested at the level of the entire novel structure may be spotted in the case of the main character's evolution as well: Oedipa's counter-entropic efforts

¹ Ibid., 201.

imply a peril which is greater than Oedipa's acknowledgement of entropy, the paranoid closure of the self or its exteriorization by acts of 'creative paranoia.' However, in spite of the abnormality of this obsessive fight, maintaining the projective fantasy is essential: "Keep it carefully! [...] If you lose it, you'll be just like the others. You start ceasing to exist."¹ The risk of Oedipa's entire endeavour, as formulated by Manfred Putz, consists in "the possibility to lose oneself in the illusions produced by the individual himself. Self-consciousness manages to find itself, but it does not know exactly what it has found."²

Oedipa does not manage to escape the closed circle of solipsism, Tristero representing just a possibility, thus, there not being a proof of an alternative reality. (Thus Pynchon remains within the modernist confines of the world.) Oedipa's problem, asserts Stephen D. Cox, is a double one, the first regarding the unrest related to the existence of an external world and, the other, to the existence of a central self, a problem that the literary critic places within the philosophical tradition of the 18th century, in George Berkeley and David Hume. For the former, says Cox, "the world we seem to see is in fact an illusion projected into our minds by the mind of God; apart from its connection with the Deity, the humankind is solipsistic."³ For Hume, "Mankind are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement."⁴

A possible influence on Pynchon as regards the problematizing of the perceptive process and of identity is William Blake, for whom the identity and the dynamics of the individual are directly correlated to his perceptions. Oedipa's trajectory includes all these principles of perception and identity, the protagonist of the novel being engaged in the exercise of selecting the sources of knowledge and valuing the relation with the external world. The obsessive-paranoid search of everything that can be logic or relevant as to the Tristero System constitutes Oedipa's chance to escape her solipsistic tower and thus to declare the external reality as different and autonomous.

The alternative to the singular existence of America, without postulating the Tristero System as being the authentic other, is estrangement, complete immersion in paranoia, the refusal to be part of the structures of an inauthentic society. The simple and plain assertion of Oedipa regarding her preference for an unconscious state, paranoia, means becoming aware of the capacity to refuse the system and to escape it. Asserting the existence of an alternative to the given history is similar to Stencil's obsessive search for V.: both characters intuit authentic realities, opposed to the world of which they are not satisfied, they sense the mystery and everything that could structure their selves authentically, yet, they do not have the capacity and the necessary force to reveal them as true and thus to assume them as the only possibility to live. Both Stencil and Oedipa are prisoners of the space between

¹ Pynchon, *Strigarea lotului* 49, 110.

² Putz, *Fabula identității*, 97.

³ Stephen D. Cox, "Berkeley, Blake, and the Apocalypse of Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*," *Essays in Literature* 1 (1980): 92.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.

commonplace and the extraordinary, between the temporal and the atemporal, inauthenticity and authenticity. Only by reaching the second term of these conceptual pairs could the two define both themselves and the universe in which they live. What makes them different from the others and in the same time saves them is their awareness of an alternative, the discontent with what is given to them, and the desire to understand and appropriate the alternative and to live according to its spirit.

2.4 Elements of the Tristero System: subversion, alternative, coherence

Oedipa is confronted with structures that reach the dimensions of a historical conspiracy: a Jacobean drama, a drawing in a public toilet, stamps from Pierce's collection, all these suggesting the presence of a counter-organization, called the "Tristero System". However, it is not the simple presence of these signs that determine their organization in particular patterns; it is Oedipa herself who is liable for imaginatively structuring potentially coherent plots: "[...] and she thought at the time when, opening a transistor radio, to change the battery, she saw the first integrated circuit. The orderly crowd of houses and streets, from this high point, was held in front of her with the same unexpected clarity, amazing as the integrated circuit plate, [...] both external models had a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, an intention of communication."¹

The signification of the Tristero System is dual: on the one hand, there is a 'merciless Other', which undermines the coordinates of the social and political world, a subversive underground communication web used by those alienated from the official culture and, on the other, paradoxically, Oedipa's internal ordering force, the stimulus she needs in her self-discovering attempt, Oedipa identifying herself with the "community of exiles", "marginals, drifters, deviants, visionaries"², for whom the degree of probability as of genuine communication is much higher.

What Oedipa wants, therefore, is both the structuring of her own environment, and restoring meaning to a society for which the peril of communicational and cultural entropy is inevitable. The withdrawal of the Tristero System followers from the communicational establishment proves the profound hiatus within society: "Since here there were God knows how many citizens who deliberately preferred not to communicate by means of the USA Postal Service: it was not an act of treason, maybe not even one of defiance. Still it was a calculated withdrawal from the life of the Republic, from its machinery."³ Somewhere else, the reader may find a description in the same register, the Tristero System being like "a network through which an X number of Americans communicate among themselves, while they keep their lies, the learned answers, the spiritual dryness, for the governmental distribution system."⁴

Oedipa's search for a reference point in the external reality, for an organizing system, is equally explained by her failure to relate to the others:

¹ Pynchon, *Strigarea lotului* 49, 79.

² Maltby, *Dissident Postmodernists*, 136.

³ Pynchon, *Strigarea lotului* 49, 112.

⁴ Ibid., 154.

Wendell “Mucho” Maas, her husband, a former used car seller, DJ for KCUF radio station in Kinneret, an imaginary city in California, gradually recedes into an artificial imaginary universe, created by LSD, while with Metzger, a lawyer working for Warpe, Wistfull, Kubitschek and McMingus, nominated to help her in executing Pierce Inverarity’s will, Oedipa cannot engage but in a superficial relationship.

2.5 Oedipa Maas – the captivity of her own escape

For Oedipa, the world is built by the accumulation of symbols among which comparisons and analogies are established or which are invested metaphorically – a characteristic of Pynchon’s style used to reflect the tension of truth and unity at the level of language. Once accumulated, all these signs start to establish significant relations and to confer coherence to the protagonist’s intuitions. Revelations upon revelations “accumulate exponentially, the more she’d have gathered, the more would have been revealed to her.”¹ Oedipa defines herself through the same method of correspondences: she identifies herself with one of the maids supposedly captive in a circular tower represented by Remedios Varo in *Bordando el Manto Terrestre*, prisoners who work a tapestry that flows out of the window and which represents the world.

The whole process of ‘weaving the world’ is representative for Oedipa’s own destiny, namely that of coherently structuring disparate hypotheses. The significance given to events and documents plays an essential role in constituting the character’s consciousness, in achieving the unity to answer to an autistic reality; on the other hand, however, the constitutive process is maintained only as a process and not as fulfillment. Oedipa’s name is itself suggestive, as Stencil’s from *V.:* Maas may be associated with Maß – ‘measure’-: her attempt to find the unity by means of which to approach external reality.

The America of *The Crying of Lot 49* is a space of communication enclaves, some enclaves that, most of the times, each correspond to one individual. The enclosure of the self, its trapping, are suggested in the novel by the rich imagery of closed systems, towers, clearly delimited spaces, the most suggestive of all being Oedipa identifying herself with one of the female characters in Remedios Varo’s painting and symbolizing the impossible escape from the limits of one’s own self. At the opposite end of these isolated spaces, one could find the omnipresent image of Pierce Inverarity, a personification of a “dynamic, aggrandizing capitalism”², the mogul of the real estate market in California, for whom the only superior embodiment is represented by the bust of Jason ‘Jay’ Gould, the archetype of the American success.

The territory left as a heritage by Pierce proves to be the whole America, consequently, the entire world: “Here was the entire continuity, San Narciso had no boundaries. Until now, no one had known how to delineate them. She had turned it

¹ Ibid., 152.

² Maltby, *Dissident Postmodernists*, 139.

into the purpose of her life, weeks before, to find the meaning of what Inverarity had left behind him, without ever guessing that the inheritance was America.”¹

Paradoxically, the territory without frontiers transforms itself into an enclosed space as long as Oedipa does not manage to decipher the signification of the received inheritance whose name is San Narciso and which suggests the closure of the city upon itself. Symmetry is perfect, despite the apparent contradiction of the terms: as Pierce Inverarity is the prisoner of his own image, the world (San Narciso) being his projection too, so Oedipa is the captive of the world she tries to understand, a hostage of her own projection to the world. At the opposite pole, intersubjectivity, mentioned by Paul Maltby, complies with the same descriptions of utopia, being equally constrictive, and not the solution Oedipa searches for, namely authentic communication: “Each couple on the floor danced whatever was in the fellow's head: tango, two-step, bossa nova, slop. But how long, Oedipa thought, could it go on before collisions became a serious hindrance? There would have to be collisions. The only alternative was some unthinkable order of music, many rhythms, all keys at once, a choreography in which each couple meshed easy, predestined. Something they all heard with an extra sense atrophied in herself. She followed her partner's lead, limp in the young mute's clasp, waiting for the collisions to begin. But none came. She was danced for half an hour before, by mysterious consensus, everybody took a break, without having felt any touch but the touch of her partner. Jesus Arrabal would have called it an anarchist miracle. Oedipa, with no name for it, was only demoralized. She curtsied and fled.”²

Besides this, there is a paradoxical simultaneity of the self isolation awe in Oedipa and the fear that her sensations and perceptions are induced or controlled from outside: “in the apocalypse that Pynchon envisions, the self is threatened both with being confined and with being subverted.”³

Manfred Pütz analyzes in *The Story of Identity* the influence of Henry Adams on the thematic preoccupations in Pynchon's novel. In *The Education of Henry Adams* and “The Rule Phase Applied to History”, Adams investigates the possibility of identifying models in natural sciences and then of applying the positive results to history. “Adams establishes limits for the possibilities of thinking, thus anticipating the end of the historical transformation and establishing the total balance of entropy.”⁴ Pynchon's characters are the followers of the tendencies enounced by Adams, being concerned with the consequences of entropy as manifested in different domains. The entropic process affects, significantly, the communication process: Oedipa fails in non-relations, starting with her husband – she defines her relationship with Mucho as a series of communication disabilities⁵ – and then extending it to everyone she gets in touch with in order to fulfil her mission of executing Pierce's will and of defining herself.

¹ Pynchon, *Strigarea lotului* 49, 160–161.

² Ibid., 119.

³ Cox, “Berkeley, Blake, and the Apocalypse of Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*,” 94.

⁴ Pütz, *Fabula identității*, 168.

⁵ Pynchon, *Strigarea lotului* 49, 98.

As we have previously remarked, the risk of the counter-entropic effort is incomparably greater than that of acknowledging the lack of structure, namely paranoia: “the evolution of the character consists in the potential trajectory from the acceptance of entropy to the paranoid closure of the self.”¹ For a paranoiac, the capacity to identify structures, models and conspiracies everywhere around him is a defining and natural one. At the end of the novel, Oedipa enumerates the alternatives he has: “1 and 0. So were the pairs ordered. Another meaning behind what was evident, or neither of them.”² Consequently, the attempts to creating coherent histories can be labeled as acts of ‘creative paranoia’ that imply the domination of Oedipa’s consciousness over everything that is around her.

Pynchon’s attitude to this positioning of characters is dual: on the one hand, he insinuates the potentiality of paranoia, while on the other hand he justifies their intervention by considering it the only possible one in their attempt to define and understand the environment in which they evolve. Oedipa’s psychiatrist recommends her to keep fantasizing as the only capacity to build meanings and thus to continue to live. The correlative themes of paranoia are entropy, the quest for order, and fictionalizing of the self.

The notion of universal order is directly correlated to the dynamic of neurosis, Pynchon suggesting the possibility of the individual to lose oneself in the universe created by him. Pynchon’s novels, says Manfred Pütz, “adopt the structural model of the analytical stories about identity, in which the objectives of self definition are never fulfilled. True adventures for the intellect, they present a type of hero who always seem to return to his starting point and to display the permanent frustrations of a self who intended to deduct his form from an encompassing context but who eventually finds himself suspended between imposed mediating acts and the lack of any advantage dedicated to mediation. The journeys of the self are transmitted as activities that self-propel, as attempts, without any result, of historical self-definition, as a paradox of solipsism, in a self lacking content.”³

3. Gravity’s Rainbow – *chaos or chaos*

From the Puritan perspective, history represents a body modelled minutely, structured according to a divine plan to its last details; however, once God vanished, the physical universe transforms itself in unjustified matter, into an absurd accident. According to Scott Sanders, “A mind that preserves Puritan expectations after the Puritan god has been discredited will naturally seek another hypothesis that explains life as the product of remote control, which situates the individual within a plot whose furthest reaches cannot fathom, that renders the creation legible once again. Paranoia offers the ideally suited hypothesis that the world is organized into a conspiracy, governed by shadowy figures whose powers approach omniscience and omnipotence, and whose manipulations of history may be detected in every chance

¹ Pütz, *Fabula identității*, 170.

² Pynchon, *Strigarea lotului* 49, 164.

³ Pütz, *Fabula identității*, 174.

gesture of their servants. It substitutes for the divine plan a demonic one. Viewed in this perspective, paranoia is the last retreat of the Puritan imagination.”¹

Pynchon’s novels confront us with various degrees of paranoia, starting from the personal one (Oedipa, Stencil) and reaching the cosmic (Tyrone Slothrop), displaying what Hofstadter calls the “paranoid style”: “The distinguishing thing about the paranoid style is not that its exponents see conspiracies or plots here and there in history, but that they regard a vast or gigantic conspiracy as the motive force in historical events. History is a conspiracy, set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power. [...] The paranoid spokesman sees the fate of this conspiracy in apocalyptic terms – he traffics in the birth and death of whole worlds, whole political orders, whole systems of human values.”²

3.1 The crisis of history, Puritanism, cosmic paranoia

Tyrone Slothrop, like Benny Profane in Pynchon’s other novel, *V.*, is a schlemihl, a perpetual victim of others’ plots, and, at the same time, projector of plots himself. Since childhood, Slothrop had been manipulated by external forces: Laszlo Jamf, the science man, Pointsman, soviet agents and other agents of the black market. When manipulation is no longer determined by concrete factors, imagination produces surrogates and projects conspiracies following the same scenario: once in a playing room, surrounded by objects, Slothrop cannot leave them only with this passive status: “These are no longer quite outward visible signs of a game of chance. There is another enterprise here, more real than that, less merciful, and systematically hidden from the likes of Slothrop.”³

His existence is interspersed with suspicions that he himself describes as paranoid. In his vision, the world is dominated either by the arbitrary and thus being completely chaotic or, at the opposite end, dominated by hidden forces that hold control on history from distance. More relevant is the conviction that this order, assumed as existing beyond the ‘remains of the world’, is not only secret, impossible to reach or understand, but voluntarily hidden from those like Slothrop. As in his previous novels, *The Crying of Lot 49* and *V.*, Pynchon taps the status of the characters held ‘on the edge’: Slothrop, Tchitcherine and Pirate Prentice, a risky positioning from where these have to fight in order to discover the order and sense of the world and of the conspiratorial history in which they live: “Those like Slothrop, with the greatest interest in discovering the truth, were thrown back on dreams, psychic flashes, omens, cryptographies, drug-epistemologies, all dancing on a ground of terror, contradiction, absurdity.”⁴

History is perceived as a distanced, confused yet authoritative order, beyond any palpable reach, which manifests in the guise of different forms of paranoia: Slothrop’s awareness of history is that it is rocket-bombs falling on

¹ Scott Sanders, “Pynchon’s Paranoid History,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 21/2 (1975): 177.

² Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Knopf, 1965), 29.

³ Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 202.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 582.

London having his name written on them or that it is a Father Conspiracy holding him as the victim: “There is a villain here, serious as death. It is this typical American teenager’s own *Father*, trying episode after episode to kill his son. And the kid knows it.”¹ Indeed, Slothrop has been a victim of his father’s conspiracy: he was made available by his father to Laszlo Jamf so that the latter could perform psychological experiments on him. For a second time, Pointsman assumes the role of the father, making Slothrop face weird experiments after which he sends for two doctors to castrate him – an action which failed fulfilment but had everlasting psychological consequences. Thus Pynchon motivates his character’s fear of a conspiracy of the Father: it is not Slothrop’s imaginary projection, but reality as it happened.

3.2 The Anomie of the Organized World

One of Slothrop’s perspectives on history is that of a well-organized universe, yet a meaningless one due to its appearance under the guise of a structure whose organizing principle misses. Pynchon constantly establishes the link between Slothrop’s paranoia and an inherited religious and mental structure, the readers being informed on his Puritan origin: a witch from Salem and a priest are his bond to a Puritan past.

At a certain moment, Slothrop asks himself whether “He’s genetically predisposed – all those earlier Slothrops packing Bibles around the blue hilltops as part of their gear [...] data behind which always, nearer or farther, was the numinous certainty of God.”² Later in the story, when he enters the Zone of the post-war Germany where the number of conspiracies is dazzling, Slothrop will search for hidden meanings everywhere, in everything he meets in his way: “Signs will find him here in the Zone, and ancestors will reassert themselves [...] his own WASPs in buckled black, who heard God clamoring to them in every turn of a leaf or cow loose among apple orchards in autumn.”³ Beyond the scattered data of history, beyond the elements of the present, Slothrop is in a continuous search for links among them, trying to identify the structure that could confer meaning to his world. Pynchon himself defines paranoia as the secularized form of the Puritan consciousness, asserting that Slothrop is possessed by “a Puritan reflex of seeking orders behind the visible, also known as paranoia.”⁴ In the novel, the truth to which one accedes by paranoia is similar to the revealed religious truth: “Paranoia [...] is nothing less than the onset, the leading edge, of the discovery that everything is connected, everything in the Creation, a secondary illumination – not yet blindingly One, but at least connected.”⁵

There is always an order ensured externally, the connections and the structures manifesting themselves continuously. However, the more Slothrop tries to establish the organizing principle, the fewer are the chances to fulfil it: Slothrop

¹ Ibid., 674.

² Ibid., 241–242.

³ Ibid., 281.

⁴ Ibid., 188.

⁵ Ibid., 703.

confers a central status to various instances, but the simple variety of his choice undermines the potential authority of any of them: industrialists, secret agents, the Father, They, a whole industrial cartel.

The last hypothesis confers the global vision of an industrial conspiracy, Slothrop finally attributing the whole course of history in the 20th century to the plots and machinations of that particular cartel. Slothrop establishes catalogues of links between General Electric, I. G. Farben, Shell, Siemens and many other corporations. More than that, Slothrop accuses one of the characters, Bland, of being a mason, thus the reader being reminded of the history of American paranoid conspiratorial thinking: “There is a theory going around that the U.S.A. was and still is a gigantic Masonic plot under the ultimate control of the group known as the Illuminati.”¹ Thcitcherine reaches the conclusion that there is an entire industrial conspiracy that supports the evolution of the Rocket: “A Rocket-cartel. A structure cutting across every agency human and paper that ever touched it. Even to Russia [...] are there arrangements Stalin won’t admit [...] doesn’t even know about? Oh, a State begins to take form in the stateless German night, a State that spans oceans and surface policies, sovereign as the International or the Church of Rome, and the Rocket is its soul.”²

Enzian, another character in the novel, goes even further, asserting that the cartel itself is only a cover for a more terrifying conspiracy: “this War was never political at all, the politics was all theatre, all just to keep the people distracted [...] secretly, it was being dictated instead by the needs of technology [...] by a conspiracy between human beings and techniques.”³ Sanders identifies this moment as “the metaphysical moment in Pynchon: the moment at which fears of conspiracy are projected onto the cosmos itself. Enzian suggests that the cartel is governed by the needs of technology, technology by matter. And matter, as every reader of Pynchon knows, is governed by the laws of thermodynamics, which point toward annihilation.”⁴

Technology, matter, death are the colours of the rainbow that Pynchon puts forth, in an acceptance of history as a distant and doomed process. Gravity represents the force of entropy, the force that guides humanity to death; it is the image of a paranoid God for whom there is no salvation or forgiveness, only destruction.

A number of other characters in the novel are victims of paranoia as well: Pirate Prentice perceives himself as being under the sign of the “Firm”, some other time the same character imagining a huge Adenoid who puts his perfect plan into practice over England. Roger Mexico, statistician, believes himself commanded by an “Agency of Control.” Pointsman, involved in a conspiracy that has as finality the reign of Pavlov’s kingdom on earth, imagines himself, together with the other guardians of Pavlov’s “Book”, as being the victim of a counterplot. All these are

¹ Ibid., 587.

² Ibid., 566.

³ Ibid., 521.

⁴ Sanders, “Pynchon’s Paranoid History,” 184.

but the most important narrative presences, the fever of the paranoid conspiracies representing a state of facts for Pynchon's participants in the novel plot.

What is nightmarish in this paranoid 'organization' of characters and events, is the fact that the deviant projections of the characters do not overlap in order to lead to the perception of a collective madness: there is no unifying paranoid plan that could somehow confer meaning to the characters' behaviour. On the contrary, each comes forth wrapped in his own paranoid projection, key character of an entire history.

3.3 Accepting paranoia – running away from anti-paranoia

Another terrifying characteristic is the presence of external manipulation: real or imaginary instances directly affect the characters' evolution and behaviour, creating the impression of the impossible control over their own existence. The symbol of all these instances is the Rocket itself, the perfect image of an object controlled from elsewhere, not a volitive instance in itself which can anytime modify its behaviour without explaining it. Thus, the logic of any historical becoming, the significant explanation of facts and behaviours are suspended, history conforming itself entirely to the arbitrary and the absurd conceived as external will.

Similar to Oedipa Maas, for whom the Tristero System represented the only alternative, Slothrop confronts himself with the same perspective: the variant to being caught in a trap which certainly leads to death is that of not belonging to any conspiracy whatsoever. The apocalyptic perspective is double: either everything relates to everything and thus triggers extinction, or nothing coheres and equally implies meaninglessness. History is either entirely determined from outside, yet from a dead center, or totally absurd; the individual is either manipulated or drifting away. "If there is something comforting – religious, if you want – about paranoia, there is also anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long."¹

Herbert Stencil from *V.* found himself in a similar situation, namely associating his self with an entropic conspiracy rather than with a projection of his imagination. Correspondingly, Oedipa Maas from *The Crying of Lot 49* is faced with the same binary choice, obliged to believe either in conspiracy or in anarchy, preferring the former, despite the horridness of his choice.

According to the Calvinist theology – to Puritanism as well – the individual belongs either to the chosen or to the expelled: the former status implies a meaningful existence since the individual is incorporated in the divine plan, while the latter is associated with a chaotic and absurd existence. Springer, a movie producer who has become an agent on the black market, discusses the two hypostases, warning Slothrop about them: "Elite and preterite, we move through a cosmic design of darkness and light, and in all humility, I am one of the very few who can comprehend it *in toto*. Consider honestly, therefore, young man which side you would rather be on."²

¹ Pynchon, *Curcubeul gravitației*, 434.

² Ibid., 495.

Slothrop prefers to be a part of anyone's plan instead of not belonging to any at all. William Slothrop, his ancestor, wrote a treatise, *On Preterition*, which was burned in Boston since no Puritan was willing to accept a life lacking divine grace: "Nobody wanted to hear about all the Preterite, the many God passes over when he chooses a few for salvation."¹

Identity is directly proportional with the historical consciousness: "The more you dwell in the past and in the future [...] the more solid your persona. But the narrower your sense of Now, the more tenuous you are."² In the eyes of the paranoiac, history is conspiratorial: to quit or to be eliminated from these conspiracies means to lose connection with the two dimensions and to focus on the present. The individual in search of meaning and order cannot relate authentically with history or reality: he is either manipulated or carried away while the loss of identity is the only result in both cases. After adopting some identity disguises and the attempt to understand the history to which he belongs, Slothrop gives up any effort to conceive himself as a person: freeing from conspiracies means the disappearance of identity in the same way in which belonging to conspiracies means disparate perceptions of one's self.

Sanders³ establishes the equivalent terms in Pynchon and Puritanism:

<i>Pynchon</i>	<i>Puritanism</i>
Paranoia	Belief
Cosmic conspiracy	Divine plan
Gravity	God's will
Member of the Firm	Selection
Exclusion from the conspiracy	Marginalization
Multiple narrative models	Typology
Distance control	Grace
Binary vision	Theism / atheism
Decadence of history	Decadence of man
Paranoid self-reference	Personal salvation
Zero	Last Judgment

3.4. The Crisis of history – the crisis of the humanity concept

Edward Mendelson, in "Gravity's Encyclopedia"⁴ labels Joyce's *Ulysses* and Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* as encyclopedic narratives since they broadly display information taken from a variety of sources. The purpose of this type of narrative is "[to] attempt to render the full range of knowledge and beliefs of a national culture, while identifying the ideological perspectives from which that culture shapes and

¹ Ibid., 555.

² Ibid., 509.

³ Sanders, "Pynchon's Paranoid History", 188.

⁴ Edward Mendelson, "Gravity's Encyclopedia," *Mindful Pleasures*, ed. George Levine and David Leverenz (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1976), 163–165.

interprets its knowledge.”¹ The writer of such a narrative evaluates the historical and individual perspectives of culture: “Encyclopedic narrative strains outwards from the brief moments of personal love towards the wider expanses of national and mythical history.”²

Both Joyce’s and Pynchon’s novels approach the problematics of defining individuality and meaning in modern society. Searching for these engages history in the process of defining reality, history representing the meaning source for an existence otherwise chaotic. However, Joyce and Pynchon state, the modality of defining and the existent definitions of history make us wrongly interpret, or simply they divert us from identifying, the fundamental human traits.

According to Karl Lowith,³ the modern man perceives existence fragmentarily, having a limited vision partially due to the speedy rhythm of changes and results in science and technology. Since we do not have a holistic perception either of the universe or of our existence, but only access to fragmented historical details, philosophers like Lowith and novelists like Joyce and Pynchon believe that we could develop just an artificial perspective on history and on ourselves, which could lead to the inability of understanding both ourselves and the others. Caught in the trap of diversity and quantitative conglomeration, we are unable to perceive the invariables that define our humanity: “We have a historically sharpened sense of the differences in human ways of life as they appear in various cultures and at different times, but we are peculiarly dull when it comes to the more essential constancy of the elementary human needs, passions, capabilities and weaknesses.”⁴

Thus history becomes a burden, an external body overcoming us, beyond which we experience the necessity of identifying the humane in us. Thomas S. Smith asserted: “The ultimate problem raised by *Gravity’s Rainbow* is not what humanity has become in front of its terrifying history, but if we can still consider ourselves human.”⁵

After unmasking the conventional perceptions of history, Pynchon and Joyce suggest modalities of approaching history that promise regaining humanity and the sense of communion. The conventional approaches to history are parodied and trivialized: history from the perspective of the cause-effect relationship, history as registering of the human progress, history as procession of people, places and events, history as God’s manifestation.⁶

In reality, history is an illusion, a nightmare, the conflict between the elite and the preterite. Any of the previous approaches proves inadequate, none of them offering a clarification of what is human or of how people interact.

¹ Ibid., 162.

² Ibid., 166.

³ Karl Lowith, *Permanence and Change* (Cape Town: Haum, 1969), 8.

⁴ Ibid., 13.

⁵ Thomas S. Smith, “Performing in the Zone: The Presentation of Historical Crisis in *Gravity’s Rainbow*,” *CLIO* 12 (1983): 255.

⁶ Cf. Susan Swartzlander, “The Tests of Reality: The Use of History in *Ulysses* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*,” *Critique* 29 (1988): 133–143.

The cause-effect relation is a recurrent motif in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Joseph W. Slade commenting on it: "Frightened by the chaos which the incidental and the charisma involve, the characters in Pynchon's novel are conditioned to trust cause and effect, control and linearity. These are in search of certainty, no matter how false their perception of it would be."¹ Pointsman illustrates this perception, asserting that his model is artificial and threatened by the "contingent": "How can Mexico play, so at ease, with these symbols of randomness and fright? Innocent as a child, perhaps unaware – perhaps – that in his play he wrecks the elegant rooms of history, threatens the idea of cause and effect itself. What if Mexico's whole generation have turned out like this? Will Postwar be nothing but »events«, newly created one moment to the next? No links? Is this the end of history?"²

Pynchon warns us that "All talk of cause and effect is secular history, and secular history is a diversionary tactic."³ A theory of history that emphasizes events from the perspective of the cause-effect relation and which does not bring in the limelight people and the relations among them, cannot value human suffering and the true feelings, leading only to the perpetuation of a pompous fictionalization of the past.⁴

Secondly, Pynchon and Joyce question the perception of history as registering of human progress. For both of them, progress means sacrificing the individual, Joyce memorably ridiculing the human "evolution": "What was their civilisation? Vast I allow: but vile Cloacae: sewers. The Jews in the wilderness and on the mountaintop said: It is meet to be here. Let us build an altar to Jehovah. The Roman, like the Englishman who follows in his footsteps, brought to every new shore on which he set his foot (on our shore he never set it) only his cloacal obsession. He gazed about him in his toga and he said: It is meet to be here. Let us build a water closet."⁵

Pynchon's perspective is even more terrifying and certainly darker: *Gravity's Rainbow* revolves around the image of the Rocket, a metaphor for progress which, created by multinational cartels, leads to huge profits of global businesses and to the destruction and death of the many. Sacrificing the marginal, namely the commoners, by manipulating history, is the modality through which corporations reach their aim: "The basic problem – he proposes – has always been getting other people to die for you. What's worth enough for a man to give up his life? That's where religion had the edge, for centuries. Religion was always about death. Perverse, natürlich, but who are you to judge? It was a good pitch while it lasted but ever since it became impossible to die for death, we have had a secular vision – yours. Die to help History grow to its predestined shape. Die knowing your

¹ Joseph W. Slade, "Escaping Rationalization: Options for the Self in *Gravity's Rainbow*," *Critique* 18 (1977): 30.

² Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, 56.

³ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁴ Cf. Swartzlander, "The Tests of Reality: The Use of History in *Ulysses* and *Gravity's Rainbow*," 136.

⁵ James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Vintage, 1961), 131.

act will bring a good end a bit closer. Revolutionary suicide, fine. But look: if History's changes are inevitable, why *not* die?"¹

Another diversionist strategy consists in perceiving history as a sequence of facts, names, data and places, without always having a particular signification. As in the first situation, this leads to ignoring the essential human dimension. In *Ulysses*, Stephen talks to his students: "'I forgot the place, sir, 279 B.C.' 'Asculum', Stephen said, glancing at the name and date in the gorscarred book. 'Yes, sir.' And he said: 'Another victory like that and we are done for. That phrase the world had remembered. A dull ease of the mind. From a hill above the corpse-strewn plain a general speaking to his officers, leaned upon his spear. Any general to any officers.'"² In his turn, Pynchon satirizes historical and political figures: John Kennedy and Malcolm X are beings conforming to their biological necessities, ignored in their public quality and rendered in their basic humanity.

Present history is defined in Pynchon under the guise of the conflict between the strong and the weak, the elite and the preterite, all from a conspiratorial, paranoid perspective: similarly, Bloom speaks about a hierarchy of poverty – from poverty to the nadir of unhappiness – accompanied by indifference: "Don't forget the real business of War is buying and selling. The murdering and the violence are self-policing, and can be entrusted to non-professionals. The mass nature of wartime death is useful in many ways. It serves as spectacle, as diversion from the real movements of the War. It provides raw material to be recorded into History, so that children may be taught History as sequences of violence, battle after battle, and be more prepared for the adult world...out here, down here among the people, the truer currencies come into being. So, Jews are negotiable. Every bit as negotiable as cigarettes, cunt, or Hershey bars."³

Both Tyrone Slothrop and Stephen Daedalus strive to escape the histories imposed by the others, the cultural and existential perceptions already formulated. Aware of their artificiality, both engage in the effort of building their own identities, in a continuous negotiation with the insubstantiality of history. Slothrop realizes that he has been cheated on: both family and society lied to him about the reality of his history since, according to all sources, he had to believe in the American dream and trust progress, but "yup they've conned you – conned you again. Richard Halliburton, Lowell Thomas, Rover, and Motor Boys, jaundiced stacks of National Geographics up in Hogan's room must've all lied to him, and there was no one then, not even a colonial ghost in the attic, to tell him different."⁴

John M. Krafft comments from this perspective Slothrop's difficulty: "Living according to the model of a false history can eliminate the possibility of reaching any future, let alone the glorious kind usually promised by such histories. The horror and despair engendered by learning the truth about the past and what it

¹ Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, 701.

² Joyce, *Ulysses*, 24.

³ Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, 105.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 266.

reveals about human nature eventually cause Slothrop virtually to disintegrate.”¹ Eventually, Slothrop becomes one of the many, one of the non-elite. Like him, Stephen Daedalus fights to overcome the others’ history, one which is imposed by the Catholic Church and the Irish culture. The *non-serviam* positioning does not bring, either for Stephen or for Slothrop, the epiphany of authentic identity; however, it represents the essential act in triggering the project of self – delimitation.

Conventional history, or rather the conventional approaches to the historical process are firmly rejected by the two novelists, the option being gaining awareness of the authentic relation between an individual and history. Stephen, like Slothrop, describes history like a nightmare from which he tries to wake up, while Bloom, another character in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, regards it as an “optical illusion. Mirage” as long as it stands in the way of self-discovery. “Joyce and Pynchon are both humanists, drawn to the preterite. They ask us to reject the conventional definitions of history that fail to consider the preterite, humanity. Our society has not been improved by cause-and-effect history or by a parade of prominent historical figures or even by the progress of modern man. Human nature and the interaction of individuals are the fundamentals of history, in any time and place. In any age, love and the need to connect are the simple intuitions that are the tests of reality.”²

Conclusion

V. – the anomie of the signified and the crisis of representation has brought into the discussion the first of the three novels by Thomas Pynchon analyzed in this article, from the perspective of problematizing crisis in history. In Pynchon, the organizing enterprise (exemplified by Herbert Stencil) of a reality that continuously eludes signification is placed antithetically to the amorphous positioning (Benny Profane) in front of a reality that overwhelms by the incontrollable of the incidental elements. Apparently opposed, the two attitudes have the same completion: the referent cannot be accommodated in any project of signification and it remains outside the intelligible.

The second novel, *The Crying of Lot 49* – discussed in *The Crying of lot 49 – “Bordando el manto Terrestre”* – continues Pynchon’s preoccupations with the relation between the real historical data and the parodical historical constructs, a relation settled against the logical and significant reconstruction. The solution suggested by Oedipa Maas consists in the significant valuing of the process, of the intention to reconstruct the public and particular history, the alternative to it being the total deprivation of meaning.

The last novel discussed, *Gravity’s Rainbow* in *Gravity’s Rainbow – chaos or chaos* reveals the most terrifying perspective on history: the “progress” of history means destruction and annihilation. The participants in the paranoid history projected by Pynchon – an enumeration of disparate, solipsistic elements – have

¹ John M. Krafft, ““And How Far-Fallen”: Puritan Themes in *Gravity’s Rainbow*,” *Critique* 18 (1977): 57–58.

² Swartzlander, “The Tests of Reality: The Use of History in *Ulysses* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*,” 142–143.

access to it either by accepting to be part of the conspiracy of which they know nothing or by marginalization and the assertion of ignorance. In both cases, any imaginative effort is condemned to ridicule, a solution suggested as alternative to a chaotic universe being the chaos itself.

Thomas Pynchon assumes the responsibility to find, structure and value the truth of the reality he presents, the truth of the history in which this is inscribed. However, truth is elusive, never to be found, knowing the past and the present is incomplete, while the characters' accounts comply with partiality. The world is governed by the laws of coincidence and contingency; hence, the character of probability in the case of the historical events, the incertitude and suspense: "History, in the end, you can never prove a thing."¹

¹ Robert Coover, *The Public Burning* (New York: The Viking Press, 1977), 476.