

“AND A SOUL IN EV’RY STONE”: THE LUDIC

NATURES OF *PALE FIRE* AND

*GRAVITY’S RAINBOW*

by

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## STATEMENT OF THESIS APPROVAL

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## ABSTRACT

The author argues that ecocriticism has overlooked important works of mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century American literature because of their unorthodox approaches to writing about nature. These unorthodox approaches revolve around the use of humor and play to formulate arguments about nature. The author argues that because ecocriticism as a political critique emphasizes ecological catastrophe, humor and ludic writing tend to get ignored in the critical discussion. The author expresses the desire to expand the conversation on ludic texts. The author argues that two texts with relatively little ecocritical attention, Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* and Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, use the aesthetic theories of Friedrich Nietzsche to explain the role of the non-human in human civilization.

In the first chapter, Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* is argued to be a novel that is about the natural source of human aesthetic production. The author synthesizes studies of the novel and argues that Nabokov's novel, both in its language and form, valorizes mimesis as the source of all aesthetic production. Nabokov's belief in some form of design is examined through mimicry, and is found to permeate the novel through structural and descriptive references to games and nature. Nabokov is found to be influenced by the theories of Friedrich Nietzsche, Johan Huizinga, and Walter Benjamin. Nabokov ultimately finds that the justification for the world is aesthetic, that nature is important to humans as the origin of all artistic impulses.

The second chapter reads Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* through the many references to Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, finding that the novel sets nature

against civilization according to Nietzsche's distinction between the Dionysian and the Apollonian. The author finds that the novel holds up the natural world as a counter-force to the capitalist impulse to control and exploit the natural and human worlds. The author examines how Pynchon uses Dionysian tropes like drunkenness, absurdity, music, and feelings of oneness in the novel in moments of resistance to the dominant order.

The conclusion suggests that the work of Friedrich Nietzsche ought to be examined as an influential source for modern views on the value of nature.

For Tasha, without whom this thesis could not have been written.

To Dan: your move.

*He who climbs upon the highest mountains laughs at all tragedies, real or imaginary.*

-Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (68)

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## INTRODUCTION

### STRANGE BIRDS

Ecocriticism needs to relax. Despite the growth of ecocriticism as a discipline and its multiplying adventures outside nature writing and straightforward realism, there is still much work yet to be done on humor and play in environmental writing. My project is twofold: to develop an ecocritical approach to ludic literature and also to carry out my own analysis of two ludic texts, Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* and Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. These texts, while the centerpieces of vast critical literatures, haven't drawn ecocritical attention commensurate with their standing. If ecocriticism is to reach the level of theoretical completeness of, for example, Marxian, deconstructive, or formalist criticism, it must have something to say in every conversation, including conversations about pie gags. *Gravity's Rainbow* and – definitely – *Pale Fire* have escaped ecocritical examination because our discipline doesn't know yet how to handle their ludic and self-reflexive discourse and structure in combination. These prominently postmodern texts are doubly difficult because their ludic aspects combine with serious introversion and self-reflexive modes of discourse. I argue that in these cases, authors Pynchon and Nabokov make their arguments about nature through Nietzschean aesthetics. My argument

here is that ecocriticism as a discipline needs to come to terms with humor. We must learn to laugh at the apocalypse, not for the sake of some hip posture, but because laughter can help us confront and cope with tragedy. So let us start with the question of why ecocriticism has such a hard time having a little fun.

It can't be that the environmental movement as a whole doesn't know how to live it up. Many environmental groups and cultural productions use comedy to reach otherwise reticent audiences. Edward Abbey's bawdy *The Monkey Wrench Gang* is as funny as it is caustic, its wit equal to its biophilia. Earth First!, which Abbey helped found, pioneered humor as a tool for environmental protest in the 1980s, and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals routinely use puns and ribald propaganda in addition to slaughterhouse videos. These groups effectively used humor to either convey their message or to throw a monkey wrench into the system. Shows like the "The Simpsons" and "South Park" use sophomoric humor to make environmental points. Blinky, a three-eyed fish spawned from nuclear waste in "The Simpsons," has become an environmental celebrity in his own right, with antinuclear energy groups appropriating his image for use as a protest symbol. Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Charlie Chaplin used comedy to show how modern industry turned people into machines and ruined natural habitats.

Perhaps because of the urgency of the various global environmental crises, ecocriticism hasn't turned yet to look at humor and play. There is the sense that because of the gravity of the situation, only those works that take climate change or ecological destruction very seriously and do so in serious

terms are fit objects for analysis. Considering the potential consequences of climate change; the fact that we are possibly living through an extinction event the likes of which haven't been seen since the end of the Cretaceous; the potential for systemic collapse due to water and resource shortage; and ending forever traditional cultural practices and ways of living, it isn't surprising, perhaps, that people feel this is a bad time for jokes. Various writers discuss climate change in terms of mourning (Wilcox), grief (Gostomski), and "petro-melancholia," mourning for our historical epoch (Lemenager). More and more, scientific and theoretical papers discuss climate change in terms of grieving, and the word "peril" is never far from the topic. Grief has emerged as a powerful narrative in itself, guiding discourse along the trajectory of a new Fall. According to this story, then, games and humor are more counterproductive than anything.

This line of reason hearkens to critiques of postmodern comedy based on "low" cultural discourses. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno argue in their famous essay, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," that, "Amusement always means putting things out of mind, forgetting suffering, even when it is on display. At its root is powerlessness. It is indeed escape, but not, as it claims, from bad reality but from the last thought of resisting that reality" (Horkheimer and Adorno 116). Humor – especially slapstick – as produced by the culture industry pacifies and desensitizes us, makes us more pliable objects of corporate power, hardly the kind of resistance to corporate hegemony that the environmental movement values. Frederic Jameson takes up a similar line of argument when he distinguishes between postmodern pastiche and parody. For

Jameson, pastiche is parody “amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists (Jameson 17). Pastiche is parody without a master dialect to fall back on, empty parroting rather than a cutting and critical style of humor. He saw parody in much of postmodern literature as nostalgic and reifying, deprived of any subversive potential. That is, pastiche is parody that simply adopts the linguistic style of its object without critical comment on that object. It could be argued that Pynchon’s appropriation of genre conventions from television, movies, and radio qualifies as pastiche under this heading, as his borrowings often don’t seem to critique the artifact or medium itself. According to these thinkers, then, there is something terribly wrong with a literature that attempts to critique through silliness because the discourse of parody is already undermined by its acceptance as one among many dialects: parody will always be pastiche. And any slapstick or silly fiction only empowers the fascistic culture industry who *wants* people to get a kick out of seeing them fictionally crushed beneath a giant foot, because this only serves to redirect and distract we Preterite from the real violence.

And there is real violence and a lot of it. Even aside from climate change, we have the famous and fairly tame example of which Aldo Leopold writes in his *A Sand County Almanac*, in which Leopold and a few fellow hunters ambush a mother wolf and her cubs, “[...] pumping lead into the pack, but with more excitement than accuracy” (Leopold 138). The hunters empty their rifles and saunter down to the mother, whose eyes, fiery even dying, awaken Leopold to

the interconnectedness of all things. This is the kind of violence we expect and which ecocriticism conditions us to seek: tragic, a moment for reflection, perhaps grieving, and learning. There is a solemnity to the proceedings that comes from the American narrative of a Fall, from having buried too many barrels in the bosom of Paradise itself.

For several reasons ecocriticism and environmentalism generally, need to free themselves from the reflex to mourn first and ask questions later. My main concern is simply that it isn't as effective rhetorically to grieve as it is to fight: we grieve what has already passed, so that framing climate change, the plights of endangered species, and the preservation of open spaces in terms of mourning only reifies a state of affairs that isn't yet entirely the case. We don't give up on changing these things, but it seems as though we have. It is a one-sided view that only sees tragedy, determinism, a long and continuous Fall. This view also seriously impairs our ability as literary critics to appreciate the full range of authors' attitudes toward the environment and their myriad means of expressing them. If we assert that all environmental narratives either exhibit or contend with the idea of a Fall and subsequent declension, then we ignore the other possible narratives, we deny the diversity and beauty of literature's weirder species of environmental consciousness.

I chose these texts in particular because they each have traits that make them particularly prickly for ecocriticism. They are *fun*, they are *playful*. Of course, each novel plays a different game. *Pale Fire* literally plays games, whereas *Gravity's Rainbow* plays in other ways, through humor, through

slapstick, through song. They are both also deeply tragic texts, whose humor and pathos interact in complex ways. They are also both examples of early postmodernist or late modernist styles, which privilege the work of art above the political statement, formal innovation over rendering the extra-textual world. Ecocriticism, for reasons that we have outlined above, tends to be uncomfortable with texts with few referential or didactic tendencies. As I have argued, although ecocriticism is coming around, these novels, despite their stature as literature, have been “under-served.” One reason for this oversight could be that within ecocriticism, there is a divide between those critics who look for environmental awareness as an aspect of the object of study, and those for whom the critical orientation comes first, so that the work need not have any particular posture with regard to the nonhuman world. The best example of the former group is Lawrence Buell, who argued, in his magisterial *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, that the criteria for an “environmentally oriented work” are: “*The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device [...] The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest [...] Human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation [...] Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text*” (emphases in original; Buell 7). While these criteria are quite broad, they essentially assert that environmental awareness is an aspect of the work itself. Although at one point (I would argue) the dominant perspective in ecocriticism, this intrinsic approach to environmental literature, which pretty

obviously tends to favor straightforward nature writing, this paradigm has been mostly succeeded by a “theory first” approach, in which the emphasis is on a theoretical posture according to which scholars read texts. Serpil Oppermann represents a kind of straddling moment arguing both that ecocriticism ought to proceed from theory (Oppermann “Ecocriticism’s...” 154), but also that not all texts display an ecological understanding (Oppermann “Seeking...” 244).

Scholars such as Gerrard, Wallace and Armbruster, and Morton all subscribe to this second approach, with Morton arguing, “Even if a Shakespeare sonnet does not appear explicitly to be ‘about’ gender, nowadays we still want to ask what it might have to do with gender. The time should come when we ask of any text, ‘What does this say about the environment?’” (Morton 5). This study is an extension of this work.

I proceed from the assumption that every cultural artifact has something to say about nature, however obliquely. I base this assumption on the work of both Edward Said, whose “contrapuntal reading” I find to be useful for the purposes of critique, and also on the work of Jacques Derrida, from whose work I learned that meaning, including the meaning of an artifact, a tree, anything, is dependent on its relations with its environments. Theoretically, every work in this way stands in relation to physical, nonhuman nature, as well as in relation to cultural constructions of what nature is. This thesis is not, however, a straightforwardly postmodern or poststructuralist reading. I read *Pale Fire* and *Gravity’s Rainbow* through their engagement with Nietzschean aesthetics. Nietzsche gives us a useful hermeneutic for a variety of reasons. The most important is that his theory

of tragedy gives us a way to understand the how and why of tragi-comedy such as we find in both *Pale Fire* and *Gravity's Rainbow*. In addition, Nietzsche's foundational status for much of postmodern thought means that his traces are scattered far and wide, and there is a great deal of evidence for his influence on our authors specifically. His aesthetics privilege the immediate experience of nature in a way that isn't often acknowledged and he valorizes irrationality, absurdity, and laughter, analogues for the slapstick kookiness and textual games we see in Pynchon and Nabokov. My reading does not hold up Nietzsche's work as a model for ecocritical theory to follow. Rather, in this context, for these authors, his work connects the act of artistic production, especially that of ludic literature, with the natural world.

*Pale Fire*, despite its many butterflies, birds, and insects, sets itself up as a game: the real structuring trope seems to be chess, which appears in several important conversations, as well as in details scattered throughout the book. The book thus presents itself as a "closed" text, one that doesn't gesture to the outside world in the same manner as a historical or realist novel. Nova Zembla is a made-up country (well...), New Wye doesn't exist; very little in the novel exists outside the novel. Once the audience acclimates itself to Kinbote's kidnapping of the poem, we seem to lose any imperative to look outside what is evidently a deeply solipsistic text. Instead, we have these little clues hidden throughout the text that point to other places in the text. The overall effect is labyrinthine: we race from poem to note to index and back, circling through the novel looking for clues. Upon closer inspection, however, we see where Nabokov has smuggled



in the outside world. Nova Zembla is an island in the North Sea that housed an infamous gulag. The ideas of games and authorship in the novel share many similarities with the work of Johan Huizinga, and the entomological themes in the novel require us to look at real insects, as well as Nabokov's biography.

Nabokov gives us a host of reasons to look outside the boundaries of *Pale Fire* proper, confuting interpretations of the novel as being only a game, a precious object, an especially well-crafted urn. Eventually, Nabokov leads us to nature and its influence on art. He argues that all art is mimetic, that art deceives because nature deceives, but that this theft is one of the chief joys of all life. Following Nietzsche, he argues that the world is actually justified by this theft, which we see equally in human and nonhuman nature in the form of play.

*Gravity's Rainbow*, too, is a peculiar bird. We can recognize the book as the product of a post-Silent Spring environmental awareness (Keesey does a good job explicating the environmental discourse at the time the novel was written), considering its lengthy discourses on the Slothrop family propensity for ruining the environment, the slaughter of the dodos, and the Schwarzkommando's cultural practices, which involve burial and earth-worship. Several critics have seized on the environmental imagery to argue that nature offers straightforward resistance to the System. I argue that humor, music, and drunkenness all play important roles in the way that Pynchon frames his environmental critique. This complicates a straightforward narrative of resistance, because Pynchon uses songs, dances, and banana peels in a variety of ways. Pynchon consciously directs us to Nietzsche's concept of the Dionysian

as a kind of master trope that combines culture and nature both at the level of discourse and on the level of structure. If we read ecocentric episodes in the novel looking only for the traditionally environmentalist imagery of peril, extinction, and pollution, we end up with an impoverished accounting of the novel's engagement with more-than-human nature. We also end up with a far more pessimistic book. But reading the dominant modes of Preterite resistance to the Elect together, we find a much more optimistic novel – though not simply optimistic – in which comedy and music spring from a natural impulse to seeking oneness and life.

Through these readings, I hope to claim new ground for ecocriticism. These novels are important for many reasons: their palpable brilliance, what David Foster Wallace, following Yeats, called “the click of a well-made box” (McCaffrey), their stylistic and structural inventiveness, their critical examinations of the act of reading and writing. Despite, or perhaps because of, these achievements, the huge roles that nature plays in these books has gone almost unnoticed, or mistaken for a road elsewhere. We can only deepen our own sense of wonder at these novels to discover the richness of their environmental awareness. And we will enrich our understanding of environmental novels by making room for these shouting, mad, and joyful texts.

## CHAPTER 1

### MERRY BANDITS: NATURE AND GAMES

#### IN *PALE FIRE*

I am going to discuss what could be called joyful theft. Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* features many acts of brazen banditry in its plot, in its allusions, and in its structure. Nabokov invites us to consider what it means to appropriate, to steal, how we evaluate literary appropriation, but also the source of our kleptomania in the natural world. I argue that *Pale Fire* is, for all its wordplay, an environmental novel evincing a keen appreciation for the joy we take from nature. Following Thomas Karshan, I will argue that Nabokov derives his idea of natural play from the work of Friedrich Nietzsche and Johan Huizinga, and I argue that Nabokov's thoughts on mimicry correlate closely with those of both Huizinga and Walter Benjamin. Even though the novel rouses us to sadness and pity for the doomed John Shade and the potentially deluded narrator, Charles Kinbote, I will show how Nabokov uses humor to turn their otherwise tragic stories into affirmations of life and of the natural world.

In *Pale Fire*, Nabokov creates a treasure trove of thoughtful puzzles, a kind of unbounded Rubik's cube, one without a definite solution, but with many possibilities. It is a *playful* text. Its most endearing attribute is that it seems to be

a text that aims first and foremost to give the reader pleasure. Nabokov doesn't give us a simply saccharine pleasure, but the subtly-textured mélange of amusement and appreciation of an immense talent at work. For example, in the introduction, the novel's ostensive narrator, Charles Kinbote, writes of John Shade, the poet behind the novel's eponymous fictional poem,

I am looking at him. I am witnessing a unique physiological phenomenon: John Shade perceiving and transforming the world, taking it in and taking it apart, re-combining its elements in the very process of storing them up so as to produce at some unspecified date an *organic miracle*, a fusion of image and music, a line of verse. (Emphasis mine, 27)

I'm going to play with the idea of an "organic miracle." This passage contains several phrases that are important for my reading here, but this is the foundation. Nabokov argues through the book for jolly theft, mimicry, and deceit: intentional acts, but acts that mimic the images and processes of nature. Further, Nabokov argues that nature itself is intentional, that, to use Nietzsche's phrase, "the existence of the world is *justified* only as an aesthetic phenomenon" (*BoT* xxii). The phrasing of the passage ("recombining its elements [...] organic miracle") gestures toward the entomological objects and metaphors that dominate the novel, the images of butterflies, bot-flies, and cicadas that recur throughout the narrative. The words "a fusion of image and music, a line of verse" recall Nietzsche's analysis of the poetic lyric as a fusion of the Apollonian image with Dionysian music. This is just a particularly sly instance of the humor permeating the novel, the literal play of words, meanings, and narration. Nature, the living world, binds these metaphors together: Kinbote calls the whole digestive-creative process an "organic miracle." Poetry itself is an organic thing, it is produced in

the interaction between Shade and nature itself. For Kinbote, both words carry extra freight. Kinbote believes in God, unlike the poet Shade. Both characters, however, have a keen appreciation for the natural world.

I read *Pale Fire* as an ode to natural deceit. Everywhere the rules of its games lead us, we meet natural objects, butterflies especially, but also trees, small plants, birds, tricks of nomenclature. Because of the care obvious in the book's construction (down to intentional typographic errors and a phony index), we cannot discount the flora and fauna of the book as mere setting, as only accidental to Nabokov's true intent or convenient images. All the correct characters draw our attention to the natural world of the novel. John Shade is an amateur naturalist who admires a farmer for "knowing the names of things" (*PF* 185) and who can himself identify birds and butterflies. He is attuned to the seasonal rhythms of New Wye, remarking in the poem that "The Toothwort White haunted our woods in May" (44). Kinbote himself can identify trees, is an "enthusiastic rock climber" (118), and waxes poetic on the beauty of the wood duck (184). These are the characters through whom Nabokov seems to speak, or who may be the final fictional author of the text itself: their attention to the natural world means that, as readers, we must pay attention.

Critics of the novel haven't necessarily missed the novel's plenitude of metaphors with vehicles taken from the natural world, but they have missed the nature. Critics who have analyzed the novel from the perspective of metaphors based on nature, such as animal mimicry, parasitism - specifically that of the bot-fly - have missed the mark in that they haven't fully examined the use of these

metaphors. They point to Nabokov's biography and his entomological pursuits or, in the case of *Pale Fire*, they relate them to the design of the novel itself, but do not find the text itself particularly edifying of nature itself. But they have laid the groundwork for a nuanced reading of Nabokov's use of those metaphors, as well as their relationship to the other famous aspects of Nabokov's work: his play, his reflexivity, his interest in death and the possibility of an afterlife, and his valorization of design. By synthesizing some of the many approaches to reading the novel, we can gain a more thorough appreciation of what nature meant to Nabokov, and what it does in *Pale Fire*.

*Pale Fire* is an environmental novel not solely because the various introversions and sleights of hand are modelled on animals' survival strategies, but because this is a tributary relationship, in which Nabokov celebrates and universalizes parasitism and mimicry. *Pale Fire* talks *about* nature as much as it *uses* nature. Nabokov uses the game-like qualities of the book as a way of resolving the melancholy meditations on chance and death in nature into a more joyful enterprise. We readers become jolly predators embarking on a chase after the "true" text, much like the professors hounding Kinbote to retrieve the manuscript of the poem 'Pale Fire.' What Karshan calls the "serio-ludic" (Karshan 199) character of the novel, and Kuzmanovich calls its "deception as utmost truthfulness" (Kuzmanovich 27), I interpret as the novel's celebration of nature's deceits, displaying a consciousness of and affection for natural tricksters, for the uncertainties built into living beings that make life possible, worthwhile, and fun.

*Pale Fire* doesn't evince a political or activist concern for the environment in the way that *Silent Spring*, published the same year, does: there is no sense of impending ecological calamity, per se. Nuclear weapons, the overriding environmental issues of the day, do appear in the novel as a series of dark suggestions. The name Nova Zembla itself can refer to an island in the Arctic Circle that the Soviet Union used as a nuclear testing range, and that also housed a notorious gulag. Andrea Pitzer, in "Memory Speaks: History and Witnessing in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*," makes a compelling case that the references to Zembla are an opening in the novel to Nabokov's biography and the extra-textual world. I don't get the sense from this reading, however, that the historical-biographical details that Pitzer argues Nabokov uses in the text amount to an environmental concern. At least, I should say, not these particular details. What her reading does is create a space for biography to infiltrate the traditionally tidy distinction the novel ostensibly draws between itself and the world. In *Pale Fire*, opening the novel to the world means that the menagerie in the text, of mockingbirds, red admirals, waxwings, and pheasants can come to stand for themselves as mockingbirds, Red Admirals, waxwings, and pheasants. According to an open reading, these nonhuman characters are worthy objects of critical attention in their own right, and not just fitting vessels for human souls or tropes. But regardless, though, of whether we can read the birds and butterflies as representing and commenting on their realist selves, we must account for the role they play as part of the novel's games as well.

*Pale Fire's* games are perhaps its most famous attributes, but they are also the most difficult to square with any open or critical reading. This is due to paradoxes embedded within the aesthetics that ultimately inform the games in the novel. Karshan's excellent *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Play* explores the ludic aspects of Nabokov's work. He limns the tradition of play in aesthetic theory that Nabokov seems to draw from, the most immediate influences being Schiller and Nietzsche, with whose writings Nabokov was familiar. Schiller argues that man was most himself while at play; Nietzsche generalizes play beyond the human, and argues, according to Karshan, that "[...] not just art but the whole world is in a volatile state of constant play, which engulfs the universe in an eternal cycle of creation and destruction" (31). Karshan quotes the ending of *The Birth of Tragedy*, in which Nietzsche argues that only by seeing the world as an "artistic game which the will, in the eternal abundance of its pleasure, plays with itself" can we redeem the ugliness and sadness of tragedy (qtd in Karshan 32). As we will see, there is a distinctly tragic element in the allusions to the *solus rex* chess problem that Nabokov repeats in the novel. Tragedy and play are two parts of a paradox that *Pale Fire* treats at length: play and games require both freedom and constraint, the ability to appropriate freely while working within a delineated set of rules. According to Karshan, Schiller leaves this paradox unresolved - play encompasses both abstract form and sensuality but remains a thing apart. Nietzsche follows the same tack, suspending the Dionysian and Apollonian in creative tension, privileging neither (which is precisely Socrates' crime: privileging the Apollonian while forsaking totally the Dionysian). Dynamic



equilibrium might be the best description, as the fatalism of tragedy depends on the possibility that characters can perform free actions. There is a similar problem with the idea of the game in general. Games are forms of play, which itself is unbounded, not defined by a limited set of objects. They also, however, proceed according to a set of rules. Like the moment in tragedy in which the tragic figure seems able to decide, in which the possibility exists for the character to choose or reject their fate, free choice is actually something of an illusion in the game. However, there must remain the possibility of transgression or creativity in order for the game to qualify as play. The question becomes to what extent does Nabokov seem to model the novel on either games – demanding a “closed” reading - or play, opening the text?

In one sense, the novel is closed, because it uses discursive clues, intentional “mistakes,” repetition, and the phony critical apparatus of Kinbote’s commentary, to create a game-like experience of reading. We don’t need to read outside the novel, nor do we necessarily draw any but an abstract lesson from it; like a game, “It contains its own course and meaning” (Huizinga 28). The novel seems to cordon itself off from the world in the same way that Huizinga describes game-playing separates itself from external reality: “All play moves and has its being within a playground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the ‘consecrated spot’ cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground” (28). In the case of *Pale Fire*, conceived of as a game, the book in its material reality is just this limit. Within the consecrated

space of the book, we move deliberately according to spacial relations that have preceded us for as long as the English language has persisted, with addendums for the specifically academic practice of reading. Nabokov demonstrates brilliantly how the act of specifically academic reading is a game, an aesthetic project undertaken over time within a framework of rules and limits, conventions. His achievement and the precise understanding he has of the conventions of academic reading is all the more impressive considering that the reader can completely ignore these conventions – such as reading each note as it appears in the text, rather than all at once at the end – and still understand the basic plot and sense of the novel (if there is a singular sense... or plot). The book even supports different meanings depending on whether or not one follows these conventions while reading (see Boyd, *Nabokov's Pale Fire* for an excellent example). Thus there is a tension within the work itself that plays out within the confines of the material book and the conventions of academic reading practices.

The text mentions a multitude of games, from ping pong (ahem) to word golf. Kinbote alone enjoys several outdoor sports, including tennis, and chess. This latter pursuit I will treat in more detail below. But where characters discuss plant nomenclature and tennis, none discuss play directly: play enters into the equation when we try to sort out how the novel works. Play appears as a hermeneutic, rather than a consistent object in the discourse of the novel itself. Walter Benjamin argues in his “On the Mimetic Faculty” that humans possess “[t]he highest capacity for producing similarities” (Benjamin 333). Benjamin sees plays as training the mimetic faculty, “Children’s play is everywhere permeated

by mimetic modes of behavior, and its realm is by no means limited to what one person can imitate in another. The child plays at being not only a shopkeeper or teacher but also a windmill and a train” (333). Mimicry in the modern world works through language, having inherited the burden of meaning from first “occult practices,” then “runes and hieroglyphs”: “In this way language may be seen as the highest level of mimetic behavior and the most complete archive of nonsensuous similarity: a medium into which the earlier powers of mimetic production and comprehension have passed without residue, to the point where they have liquidated those of magic” (336). Human language and play mimic nature indirectly through semiotics, but they are also part of human nature.

Johan Huizinga, whose book, *Homo Ludens*, has proven valuable to scholars studying play in Nabokov’s novels (Karshan 9), argues that play is as important as a criterion of humanity as intelligence. Two things stand out for my thesis here: first, that he makes no distinction between human and animal play except in level of complexity, so that play is a universalized *natural* phenomenon; Nabokov describes mimicry in terms that are very similar to Huizinga’s descriptions of play. Huizinga doesn’t distinguish between games and pure play as I do, but qualifies the former as a subspecies of the latter. Play must have limits and rules, must be “time-bound”: “[a game] has no contact with any reality outside itself, and its performance is its own end. Further, it is sustained by the consciousness of being a pleasurable, even mirthful, relaxation from the strains of ordinary life” (Huizinga 230). He argues that play isn’t limited to humans: “Animals play just like men. We have only to watch young dogs to see that all

the essentials of human play are present in their merry gambols” (19). This is an interesting assertion, since aesthetic appreciation (“no contact with any reality outside itself”) is a criterion of play itself.

For Huizinga, play encompasses all unfettered, aesthetic action. Aesthetic here means noninstrumental contemplation: language, whose existence seems superficially utilitarian, “that first and supreme *instrument* which man shapes in order to communicate, to teach, to command” (emphases mine, 22), aestheticizes in the very act of naming, by raising them to the “domain of the spirit” (23). Further, since “[a]ll play means something” (19), meaning itself isn’t the sole province of humanity. Nabokov’s aesthetics of natural deceit plays with this idea in interesting ways, going beyond the human or animal to posit aesthetics inherent in nature itself: aesthetic sensibility without an obvious subject. As we will see, Nabokov’s concept of mimicry hews closely to Huizinga’s definition of play.

The tension between play and games is evident in the critical literature on the novel. Karshan shows how the novel participates in a tradition of literary game dating back to Erasmus’ *In Praise of Folly*. Early *lusus ingenii* made heavy use of irony and skepticism and their targets were scholars and stoics and pedantics (199). Essentially, their skepticism and irony were send-ups of schools of thought that took life too seriously, schools for whom the search for truth excluded all else, including joy. Erasmus and Nabokov, according Karshan, wrote their games to illustrate the folly of human life, to show that “life is a game played by humans for the amusement of the gods” (203). On the one hand, the

games themselves are shows of pure individual literary talent, but on the other, their message is essentially fatalistic, an incongruity very much in evidence in *Pale Fire*.

The schools of criticism roughly divide according to how the individual critique accounts for the games in the novel. More open readings that explain the novel from the perspective of Nabokov's biography or context - Pitzer's reading is an excellent example of these - tend to downplay the games, focusing on the novel's intersections with the extra-textual world. Those critics like James Ramey, and Chris Ackerly, whose readings participate wholeheartedly in the novel's games, or who read the novel as first and foremost one of Karshan's *lusus*, tend to fall on the deterministic side: the game depends on a delineated set of rules that determines play. Ackerly and Pitzer's critiques represent the furthest extremes; where Pitzer ignores the games entirely, Ackerly interprets the entire structure of the novel according to a chess puzzle Nabokov discusses in *Speak, Memory*, arguing that "*Pale Fire* is a riddle with an elegant solution" (93). At the heart of each of these critiques is a sense of what Nabokov-as-author means inside the bounds of the novel: is Nabokov himself a presence within the novel in the form of biographical details, and thus more at the whim of the history to which his characters and setting alludes, or is he a determining, god-like absence, like the composer of a chess problem? To what extent is the novel determined?

Nabokov stages the debate over authorial presence and control between Shade and Kinbote. In the notes to line 549, Kinbote and Shade argue about the

existence of God. During the course of the argument, it becomes clear that the argument is as much about design and who sets the hermeneutical “rules” as much as it is about the existence of a “Higher Intelligence” (*PF* 225). In this case, “Higher Intelligence” can mean equally ‘God,’ or ‘author.’ Kinbote describes God as being a “Designer of death,” a phrase that describes as well Kinbote’s emplotting Shade’s death within the confines of the poem: he is literally giving design to Shade’s otherwise meaningless death. Kinbote, adorably insane author that he is, argues for the necessity of design and authority in terms that explicitly evoke chess: “Poor Kinbote’s ghost, poor Shade’s shade, may have blundered, may have taken the wrong turn somewhere - oh, from sheer absent-mindedness, or simply through ignorance of a trivial rule in the preposterous game of nature - if there be any rules” (226). “Blundered,” and “trivial rule” - such as the ability of pawns to attack *en passant* from their starting position - reinforces the chess metaphor. Shade’s response, “There are rules in chess problems: interdiction of dual solutions, for instance,” seems a flimsy retort to Kinbote’s bloviating, except that it points out the determinism of his claims (226). Shade subtly argues for the preeminence of chance through his *reductio* of Kinbote’s argument.

Kinbote’s answer is nuanced: “I had in mind diabolical rules likely to be broken by the other party as soon as we come to understand them... The demons in their prismatic malice betray the agreement between us and them, and we are again in the chaos of chance” (226). Even as he undercuts his own point about the necessity of Providence and design, Kinbote’s argument makes

an excellent point about reading the novel itself. If we read ourselves as readers into the role of the demons in Kinbote's retort, then Kinbote has already given up holding the interpretation of the text to a single solution. At the same time as Nabokov opens the possibility of open, multiple readings, we must note the ironic undercutting of Shade's argument. Although Shade seems the more trustworthy of the two characters, we know that in fact the novel is littered with references to chess problems and the characters, especially Kinbote, refer to themselves as being chess pieces. Depending on the provenance of the novel, the privileged speaker of the passage changes, for example, whether Shade is ultimately the author of the novel or whether it is Kinbote or Prof Botkin.

What happens in this exchange is a kind of intertwining of possible readings of the novel: Nabokov, putting the argument for a single solution into Kinbote's mouth makes it automatically suspect, whereas Shade's belief in chance is already undercut by the evident designs in the novel. Nabokov leaves us without determination, between the two interpretations, uncertain of how much of the novel is chance, and how much meaningfully interconnected. I interpret this interpretive waffling not as a textual skepticism, which suspends the reader in an in-between position, unable to give their assent to either reading. Rather, I see the novel as suggesting a both-and approach in which readings like Ackerly's and Pitzer's contribute equally to an appreciation of the overall theme of natural deceit. Instead of indeterminacy, I suggest that this is actually free play built into the discourse of the novel.

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“Game” readings such as Ackerly’s are on the mark to a certain extent. By writing the novel as a game, Nabokov hammers in the idea of nature as part of a design. He uses word games like word golf and anagrams, but he also uses chess, specifically the chess problem, as a metaphor for intentional design in nature. In particular, the *solus rex* chess problem that Nabokov mentions twice in the novel functions as a paradigm of the author in relation to their work, what I call natural authorship. Because it doesn’t seem that Nabokov endorses a theistic authorship: in fact, Kinbote seems to parodize the very notion. Instead, what I call “natural authorship” is Nabokov’s way of substituting an indefinite, absent author that isn’t identical to a God in the Christian sense that Kinbote understands. This explains certain of Shade’s quirks of belief, as well as “flattens” the problem of authorship with regard to Kinbote. Most importantly, it points to an appreciation on Nabokov’s part of an aesthetics derived from nature.

Chess images in the novel point to a balance between possibility and determinism. On the one hand, chess is a rule-governed game, but within the bounds of the board and the rules, an infinite number of moves and combinations are possible. Indeed, Kinbote calls the section in the poem about the Institute of Preparation for the Hereafter (I.P.H.) a “trivial variant” (238), the word variant possibly referring to either variations on the text or to possible lines in a chess opening. The conversation quoted above between Shade and Kinbote occurs after a game of chess, “a draw” (*PF* 23). In the event of a stalemate, half a point goes to each player, rather than neither receiving the point. Nabokov seems to be speaking through the scene, withholding his assent from either character’s



position. What is most important about the scene is how Nabokov establishes chess as a hermeneutic for the problem of authorship in the novel.

The character who epitomizes questions of authorship and design is, of course, Kinbote. Despite his desperation to have his story told, he denies hijacking the book to this end, protesting that he has “no desire to twist and batter an unambiguous *apparatus criticus* into the monstrous semblance of a novel” (86). James Ramey, whose solution to the novel is elegant and nightmare-inducing, argues that Kinbote is a parasitic bot-fly who uses Shade’s poem as a vehicle with which to implant his story in the reader. Kinbote “reproduces” himself, in a sense, by attaching what he believes to be his life-story to an unsuspecting carrier, Shade’s poem, which is much likelier to reach potential ‘hosts’ than Kinbote’s own publications would be” (Ramey 189). According to Ramey, Kinbote’s decision to implant his narrative in Shade’s poem mimics the truly grotesque methods by which the bot-fly reproduces: the bot-fly captures a carrier insect, attaches its eggs to the carrier’s underside, which then fall off when the carrier lands on a mammal. The eggs hatch and the larvae burrow under the host’s dermis until they’ve matured after feeding on the host, at which point they burrow back out and fly away. Ramey’s reading is persuasive on a number of points, but I choose to read the evidence somewhat differently: Kinbote attempts to take up an authorial position with regards to Shade’s text, trying to re-create the position that he, in fact, finds himself in: that of a piece at the mercy of a player.

Reading Shade's poem after his death, Kinbote laments that Shade chose 'Pale Fire' as its title, rather than his own suggestion, 'Solus Rex' (*PF* 296), and earlier in the novel, he writes that his alter ego, Charles the Beloved "[h]ad the amusing feeling of his being the only black piece in what a composer of chess problems might term a king-in-the-corner waiter of the *solus rex* type" waiting for the anti-Karlist government to dispose of him (118). In another passage, we find out that the King's/Kinbote's insignia is a "black chess-king crown" (107). From Kinbote's self-descriptions as a chess piece, we know that he doesn't necessarily feel in control of his own fate, but that his moves are "forced," we might say.

The way that Kinbote portrays Gradus in his notes reinforces this view. Kinbote speculates that Gradus is "[...] a chess knight (that skip-space piece) standing on a marginal file," who cannot understand the potential consequences of his actions. His movements throughout the novel resemble the movements of a chess knight, bounding over the board from country to country. They also resemble the movements of a particularly inept player confronted with a chess problem, bungling back and forth until stumbling onto the solution. Aficionados will here point out that Kinbote's fear of checkmate is unfounded, as being captured by a knight alone is impossible (and indeed Gradus blunders, letting the king escape), but the point is that Kinbote sees himself as a piece in a larger composition, rather than the composition's author.

Reading Kinbote as a chess piece in a problem, we must turn our attention to the player behind him. Ackerly quotes Nabokov arguing that "It should be understood that competition in chess problems is not really between

White and Black but between the composer and the hypothetical solver (just as in a first-rate work of fiction the real clash is not between the characters but between the author and the world), so that a great part of a problem's value is due to the number of 'tries'—delusive opening moves, false scents, specious lines of play, astutely and lovingly prepared to lead the would-be solver astray" (*SM*; quoted in Ackerly 94). The latter half of the quote ought to be kept in mind for later. For my purposes here, the most important aspect of a given problem isn't the state of play on the board, but the composer implied by the problem: Kinbote is only the visible piece acting in the absence of the composer. In a sense, the pieces are meaningless except with reference to the will that directs their movement. At the same time, Kinbote - and, we can assume, the other characters - still move in the absence of the composer.

What or who is this invisible composer? On the surface level, we can say that the absent composer is just a higher order of narrator, be it Botkin, Shade, or Nabokov himself. But it is more interesting to ask what these higher-order narrators are there to demonstrate. Why not skip the trickery and introduce an unproblematic Shade or Botkin as the final narrator? It is because Kinbote, or the figure of the piece moving on its own and at the same time at the behest of an absent player, is a metaphor for the author mimicking natural deceit.

Whoever the highest-order narrator turns out to be is somewhat beside the point.

The chess problem composer practices a "splendid insincerity" that mimics natural deceit. This is a general aesthetic for Nabokov: art partakes either better or worse in a general deceit that is part of the living, breathing world.

Ramey quotes Nabokov arguing that "all art is deception and so is nature; all is deception in that good cheat, from the insect that mimics a leaf to the popular enticements of procreation" (qtd in Ramey 186). Zoran Kuzmanovich, arguing for the imminence of a hereafter in Nabokov's fiction, writes

[A]ll fiction in its reliance on suspended disbelief requires both deception and self-deception, Nabokov's claim that an artist is at his best when 'using his imagination for the purpose of complex and unnecessary deception' seems to emphasize the presence of storytelling but as an evaluative principle. Moreover, Nabokov seems to attribute insincerity to nature itself - arguing that 'Nature always deceives' and that '[t]he writer of fiction only follows Nature's lead.' (Kuzmanovich 26)

For Nabokov it seems, all art mimics nature: the design of the novel and the design of living things are species of the same genus.

Mimicry is one of the more popular topics in Nabokov scholarship, perhaps because critics see it as a bridge between his quite positivistic practice of lepidopterology and his much more magical fiction. Kuzmanovich argues that for Nabokov, aside from just visual mimicry, "mimicry and detection of mimicry end up intimately connected with the origins of language" (36), so that the possibility of narrative expression itself rests on mimesis. This dovetails with Nabokov's more often-cited belief in *Speak, Memory*, that

[n]atural selection, in the Darwinian sense, could not explain the miraculous coincidence of imitative aspect and imitative behavior, nor could one appeal to the theory of 'struggle for life' when a device was carried to the point of mimetic subtlety, exuberance, and luxury far in excess of a predator's power of appreciation. I discovered in nature the non-utilitarian delights that I sought in art. Both were a form of magic, both were a game of intricate enchantment and deception. (qtd in Zimmer 48).

There is, in Zimmer's words, an "aesthetic surplus" in the perfection of mimesis between species such as the Monarch and Viceroy butterflies that goes beyond the minimum level of protection necessary to fool predators (Zimmer 53). This excess implies appreciation for Nabokov, as though these near-perfect mimics had been "invented by some waggish artist precisely for the intelligent eyes of man" (*TG* 105; qtd in Zimmer 48). Language and art depend on an excess of meaning beyond utility, beyond the communication of information: mimesis is nature *at play*. Thus, we should be able to see in Nabokov's most playful novel the evidence of this excess.

It is difficult to make the case for specific instances of mimicry in *Pale Fire*. We cannot say that the book mimics mimics - if so, the mockingbirds would play a much greater role, and instead of swarms of Red Admirals we would find Viceroy's. Ramey shows that it is easier to make the case for the novel enacting mimicry on a structural scale. As we have seen in the work of Walter Benjamin and Johan Huizinga, play and mimetic activity are closely related. For Benjamin, the former is an aspect of the latter. For Huizinga, play defines who we are as human beings - there is an element of play in nearly all our activities. *Pale Fire* seems to enact this theory by opening nearly every object and description to multiple interpretations while implying that only one ("interdiction of dual outcomes") possible reading can be correct. So if we cannot find mimicry specifically in the text, then perhaps the problem is that we are trying to follow one thread in a knot that isn't meant to be unraveled. What we ought to look at is

the thing itself, the structural issues that perhaps we can cut through if we cannot untie them.

The narration is itself a kind of mimicry that centers on gestation and emergence. Ramey's argument, summarized above, is that Nabokov models Kinbote's appropriation of Shade's poem on the reproductive strategy of the bot-fly. The potential author of Kinbote, Professor Botkin's name alludes to his identification with the maggots of the bot-fly, called bots. We learn that Sybil Shade, John's wife, calls Kinbote "an elephantine tick; a king-sized botfly; a macaco worm; the monstrous parasite of a genius" (*PF* 172). The several references to cicadas make more sense when we look at them as examples of structural mimicry of natural objects. Shade's mistranslation of "*je nourris / Les pauvres cigales*" follows several lines that describe the sloughed husks of cicadas (ll 241-242; ll 236-239). Imagining the comparatively massive commentary emerging from the poem, we could read Kinbote's commentary as the mature form of the poem, in which case Shade really does feed the cicadas. Kinbote's note to line 238, the "empty emerald case," protests with some indignation that "Shade said that he had once questioned a class of three hundred student and only *three* knew what a cicada looked like. Ignorant settlers had dubbed it 'locust'..." (168) Kinbote protests on behalf of his commentary: the settlers mistook the harmless, boisterous cicada for a ravaging and destructive locust, the same mistake that readers make who wish to read his notes as plundering and devouring the poem. These parallel readings illustrate how the novel reinterprets appropriation and emergence as both natural and playful.

If we turn to the title with mimicry in mind, we can see how the section of *Timon of Athens* from which it is taken can be read as itself exultant. The full text reads:

The sun's a thief, and with his great attraction  
 Robs the vast sea; the moon's an arrant thief,  
 And her pale fire she snatches from the sun;  
 The sea's a thief, whose liquid surge resolves  
 The moon into salt tears. (quoted in Ackerly 99)

Timon universalizes appropriation, so that everything in nature steals at some point from everything else. As we've seen above, this appropriation or mimicry is exactly the kind of play that makes art possible. In effect, the title legitimizes Kinbote's protest on behalf of his commentary as being a work of emergent art - the singing cicada - rather than a locust. It also legitimizes the bot-fly of Ramey's reading, reversing our evaluation: Kinbote as "Kingbot" (*PF* 257) practices an art that is just a more honest appropriation than his source material.

Kinbote himself thinks of artistic production in terms of appropriation and predation. Shade at one point questions the veracity of Kinbote's account, asking him how he could have known so many private details of the king's life. Kinbote answers, "My dear John [...] do not worry about trifles. Once transmuted by you into poetry, the stuff *will* be true, and the people *will* come alive. A poet's purified truth can cause no pain, no offense. True art is above false honor" (214). Kinbote argues that since art robs and deceives by its very nature, moral terms such as "honor" just don't apply. Dishonesty in art is something to celebrate – the "poet's purified truth can cause no pain"; the appropriation and distillation of the original is something *more* beautiful than the thing itself, truer, even. For him,

it is a natural process that is joyful and timeless. In one of the penultimate scenes, Kinbote, finally in possession of Shade's poem, describes language in terms that bring us back to Huizinga and Nietzsche. Kinbote walks with Shade toward his house and Shades imminent death. He tells us that,

We are absurdly accustomed to the miracle of a few written signs being able to contain immortal imagery, involutions of thought, new worlds with live people, speaking, weeping, laughing. We take it for granted so simply that in a sense, by the very act of brutish routine acceptance, we undo the work of the ages, the history of the gradual elaboration of poetical description and construction, from the treeman to Browning, from the caveman to Keats. (289)

The impulse to play is one that co-evolves with humans, an "immortal" and timeless attribute to create and play through language. He mentions both the "involutions of thought," the chess problems and closed readings, as well as "new worlds." Even if Kinbote is insane, if he "warps everything around him into reflections of himself" (Gelaf 428), we can read this passage as his affirmation of his predation. He doesn't warp so much as devours, digests it, brings it *into* himself:

Although I am capable, through long dabbling in blue magic, of imitating any prose in the world (but singularly enough not verse – I am a miserable rhymester), I do not consider myself a true artist save in one matter: I can do what only a true artist can do – pounce upon the forgotten butterfly of revelation, wean myself abruptly from the habit of things, see the web of the world, and the warp and the weft of that web. (*PF* 289)

Kinbote brags about his prowess at mimicry; he also uses predatory ("pounce") and spider metaphors (pouncing on a butterfly, "see the web") to describe the "true artist." The butterfly resonates with several other intra- and extra-textual objects and facts, re-iterating the most powerful images of mimicry and deceit in



the novel. One could read into the lines Nabokov's own love of Lepidoptera: Nabokov seems to speak through Kinbote at the moment. According to this reading, Nabokov stamps his own authorial imprimatur to the idea of art as being an act of mimicry and predation.

We can also take from the title a lesson that brings us back to the solus rex composition: authorship is always unsettled. *Pale Fire* enacts problems of textuality and authorship by presenting us with an author whose work is blatantly stolen, and whose agency is suspect. The novel doesn't give us criteria with which to sort and evaluate readings or sources, be they apparently from Nabokov's own biography or Shade's. Kinbote as the lone piece opposed to us can either be the object of inquiry in himself, as in the solution-oriented readings of the novel, or he can gesture outward to the allusions and historical circumstances of the composer invisible behind the board. But in this indeterminacy, as Nabokov has us racing around notes, sources, from tragedies in literature and history to the comedy of Kinbote's commentary, we are shown nature at play. The lone king is a "triumphantly" singing cicada, resplendent in the ebullience of his theft (163).

## CHAPTER 2

### THE GREEN UPRISING: THE REVOLT OF THE DIONYSIAN IN *GRAVITY'S RAINBOW*

Our first glimpse of Dr. Edward (Ned) Pointsman is from the perspective of a dog. The dog wanders through the ruins of an apartment demolished in a rocket attack. “He has the memory, or reflex, of escaping into similar darkness from an Irish setter who smells of coal smoke and will attack on sight” (*GR* 42). The dog becomes aware that “tonight’s threat is something new: not so violent, instead a systematic stealth he isn’t used to” (43); indeed, Pointsman has been stalking him into the building. Pointsman stands for a mechanistic universe: as a Pavlovian, he is the embodiment of linear rationalist thinking, cause and effect, conditioning and response. Here, he is a metonym for the softly coercive (“not so violent”) system (“systematic”) that instrumentally uses life for its own purposes. The System, of course, can be brutally coercive as well. But here, at this juncture in the novel, the violence of which the System is capable is still a conjecture or possibility expressed only in Pointsman’s plans for the dog. Roger Mexico, a young statistician assisting Pointsman in the hunt, tells the dog as he creeps upon it with a bottle of ether, “*Come* on mate, it’ll be over before you know it. Pointsman just wants to count the old drops of saliva, that’s all. Wants to

make a wee incision in your cheek, nice glass tube, nothing to bother about, right? Ring a bell now and then. Exciting world of the laboratory, you'll love it" (45).

Armed with a net and a bottle of ether, the two scientists encircle the dog but it is not to be. Pointsman traps his own foot in a detached toilet, can't pry it off, "can't reach inside the toilet bowl even to untie his fucking *boot*" (43) and is forced to give an ineffective chase with the toilet in tow. Meanwhile, Roger Mexico is getting a little affected by the ether and loses the cap, only exacerbating the situation, and lodges himself in an abandoned child's stroller after a mistimed attempt. Having trapped the dog between them, finally, Roger lunges, misses, nose tackles Pointsman holding the net, entangling them both beneath a swaying, unsupported wall. "We're for it," Pointsman laments. Roger tells him "Roll." "They contrive to roll a few yards down toward the street, by which time the wall has collapsed, in the other direction" (46), and the dog, needless to say, is long gone, saved by slapstick.

This passage is an excellent example of what I will argue is a strategic alliance in *Gravity's Rainbow* between nature and comedy. The relationship that Pynchon weaves between the two is complex and takes different forms at different levels of discourse. Comedy, especially Adorno's hated slapstick, privileges the Preterite in the novel. In the action of the plot, Pynchon uses slapstick and ribald humor to help Preterite characters escape the clutches of the System over and over again. Humor doesn't favor the System in the same way. This is because comedy represents an overflowing of life: comedy represents the

ineradicable surplus of nature that the System strives to control. Pynchon represents this surplus – which always appears as an eruption, an exploding cigar - in terms that directly allude to Nietzschean aesthetics, specifically images that are derived from the Dionysian artistic impulse in *The Birth of Tragedy*, as well as from *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Pynchon's humor is, in this sense, a redemption, a reprieve, “a spell, against falling objects” (10).

At another level, Pynchon's humor tends to sharpen his environmental critiques in ways that have been neglected by ecocritics studying the novel. Much of what critics have singled out as Pynchon's ecological consciousness is due to his Nietzschean use of comedy and tragedy in combination; humor and tragedy are both celebrations of life. David Cowart argues that “in one novel after another, Pynchon has devoted his formidable powers of subversion and satire to exposing the false premises behind the technocratic syllogism” (Cowart 136). In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon juxtaposes the tragic and comedic, the high-cultural moment with vulgarity. This whiplash effect heightens the effect of both its comedic and tragic components. Many critics interpret the novel's overall posture as one of hopelessness: the System is simply too strong, too ubiquitous and thus the humor of the novel is a kind of bleak distraction. I see the novel's comedy doing something much more positive. Pynchon argues that humor is part of an ongoing “green uprising” that cannot be quelled; while the System's power might be formidable, as long as there are whoopee cushions, its control will never be complete.

There is a small but growing body of ecocritical literature focused on Pynchon. Some of his novels seem to all but beg for ecocritical attention - *Mason & Dixon* springs to mind - but *Gravity's Rainbow* has "caused nary a ripple in ecocritical circles" (Coughran 205). Coughran describes the relative dearth of ecocritical work on Pynchon in general, and though many critics address nature more or less tangentially, criticism that does address nature often does so in the service of other ends. Much like in Nabokovian scholarship, nature is only instrumental to a critique of science, of capitalism: it is an important step on a road elsewhere. These scholars' work is important in itself, as writers like Paul Bové tend to focus on events and characters in the novel that form important, if not obvious, linkages with the natural objects and events with which ecocritics are concerned. Just as humans are not the only victims of genocide in the novel, nature is not the only exploited portion of the world. Pynchon does not follow straightforwardly Carsonian approaches to talking about ecological disaster. Most often, his environmental critiques intertwine human and nonhuman narratives such as in those in the Nordhausen sections and undercut the tragedy of their subjects with humor.

Complicating the picture are the parallel narratives of extinction and victimization that weave their way through the novel, and the consensus that the novel's final outlook is decidedly gloomy. Pynchon portrays both human and nonhuman extinctions, leading us unsure for whom we ought to mourn, ourselves or Nature. The same holds true for the victims of science in the novel: we aren't sure where the book's loyalties finally lay. This indeterminacy, combined with the

novel's use of satire, parody, and cultural tropes, leads scholars to discuss human victimization through nature, rather than focusing on the natural as its own category, an end in itself. Extinction and science are themes commonly treated by scholars whose work doesn't self-identify as ecocritical. With different emphases, several scholars have treated the attempted genocide of the Hereros as well as the creation of Imipolex G. Their work, too, tends to focus on the tragic aspects of the novel, its bleak outlook for Nature in the face of global capitalism. Paul Bové's excellent "History and Fiction: the Narrative Voices of Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*" makes the case that "[...] *Gravity's Rainbow* is an historical novel that stages the conflict between elect and preterit, between nature and technology, between historical human agency and grace [...]" and reads the novel's intriguing scientific tropes alongside its historical referents (660). Bové argues that,

[...] the elect, accepting the second law as inescapable, conclude that nature itself must be transcended and that their election by God entitles them to dispose all of nature's resources and human agency to the effort to escape entropy and gravity. Over and against this thermodynamic and gnostic compulsion, Pynchon places the human historical domain of life, earth, and generation—where the preterit indwells. (662)

He reads the genocide and subsequent racial suicide of the Herero Schwarzkommando as an example of the elect's logic adopted by victimized preterites. Bové refrains from offering hope for resistance, evincing a common sentiment among Pynchon's critics that Pynchon's own estimations of the possibility for actual freedom from the influence of the System are slim to nonexistent.

Margaret Lynd is only slightly more optimistic in her analysis of the interaction between science and agency in *Gravity's Rainbow* - and this is in part due to her acknowledging the absurdist or comical aspects of the novel. Lynd argues that Pynchon portrays science as an oppressive technique for reducing complexity and instituting human control. Pynchon sets discourses of science against those of nature, femininity, and blackness, chaos. Lynd invokes Donna Haraway's discussion of the coyote, "Nature as trickster," arguing,

For Pynchon, it is neither accidental nor puzzling that the history of science should coincide with the history of the West at its global worst. If other discourses—political, psychological, economic, religious, aesthetic—are interwoven with the scientific, both in history and in the novel's narrative trajectory, the development of the V-2 rocket, a sign of things to come in the postwar period, marked the nearly—but only nearly—complete hegemony of science in a world bent on self-destruction. Yet however persistently the Rocket may hover, Nature the trickster just as persistently follows Godel: there is always a little noise in the system, something forgotten, misplaced, unaccounted for—perhaps the never-quite-extinct desire for life [...] (Lynd 76)

Lynd puts her finger on an aspect of the novel that isn't always mentioned, especially with regard to the role that nature plays in the novel, which is that Pynchon depicts resistance to the system - however doomed to failure it may be - through comical absurdity and popular genres. Discussing the drug oneiron, which induces a paranoid state, Joseph Slade argues, "For the narrator [oneiron's hallucinations] are both comic and sinister":

Implicit in his narrator's posture is the similarity between paranoia and art and understanding. To understand existence and to create art is to extract order from chaotic experience or to impose order upon it [...] The very seriousness of the endeavor is comic, perhaps because laughter is the only reward for what costs so much effort. (160)

Comedy here is a kind of compensation for the difficulty and terror of artistic creation: for Slade, comedy undercuts the seriousness of the novel's themes of paranoia and apocalypse. Shawn Smith uses the false raid on a warehouse at the end of the novel which results in Major Marvy's castration to show how "coincidence and misperception" demonstrate that "the great processes of contemporary history operate outside the range of ordinary human perception and control" (78). I argue that this episode is more than simply an instance of Pointsman's miscalculating the chaotic potential of the Zone: it is a carefully crafted set-piece that sets up two of Slothrop's most persistent antagonists for a fall, leaving Slothrop blissfully unaware, ensconced in the embrace of a prostitute. This scene is zany, it is knee-slapping hilarious, and ends with the System castrating itself, in a way. We can see in miniature how Pynchon sets up positively hopeless scenarios, the baddies close behind, and turns the situation with a joke.

Although parody and satire are ubiquitous throughout the novel, ecocriticism doesn't generally take note of them. I would argue that this is partially due to ecocritics' habit of taking their objects of study very, very seriously. It would be unseemly to find anything to laugh about in the fate of the dodos. Ecocriticism deals with disasters, its works is always mindful of the background hum of anthropogenic climate change, the Pacific gyre, extinctions well- or unpublicized, and the steady, high pitch of unabated development. Much of *Gravity's Rainbow* itself is a tragedy unfolding, the becoming of a gloomy future for humans and nonhumans alike, something definitely ominous. Many of



the smaller tragedies are stories familiar to environmentalists: Slothrop's family clearing the countryside of its forests to print useless German currency, the drunken extermination of the dodo, toxic waste produced as a byproduct of the rocket's manufacture, and the growing threat of nuclear war. The trajectory of the postwar world, its impulse toward annihilation exhibited clearly in the rocket hanging moments above the Orpheus Theater, is an overarching tragedy that contains the others, the bomb suspended above the theater signalling history's trend deathward. This is the stuff of ecocriticism, these life-or-death struggles between Nature and its allies and the corporations, governments, ideas that seek to exploit or despoil it.

Ecocritics examining *Gravity's Rainbow* tend to focus on the power of corporate or state actors over nature. They focus on the the scenes of Elite manipulation and murder, the victimization of humans and nonhumans alike. Douglas Keeseey's approach in "Nature and the Supernatural: Pynchon's Ecological Ghost Stories" is interesting and representative. He argues that the paranoid "discovery that *everything is connected*, everything in the Creation" (*GR* 717) is actually an ecological admonition, that the copious ghosts appearing in the novel "[...] represent a warning to the human race that, in destroying others in the physical world, one is really destroying oneself, for the lives of all species in the biosphere are interdependent and no single species in the system can be lopped off without shortening the life of those remaining" (Keeseey 84). Keeseey focuses on the Mauritius episode, in which Katje Borgesius's ancestor, Frans van der Groov, participates in the Dutch mass murder of the dodos. Van der Groov

represents the European imperialist project, its voracious appetite for control and death. Thomas Schaub (“The Environmental Pynchon”) and Robert McLaughlin focus on Pynchon’s dramatization of the invention of plastics, specifically the intimate connections in the novel between Imipolex G and IG Farben, and their participation in the conspiracy that experimented on young Tyrone Slothrop. McLaughlin argues that “[...] for Pynchon IG Farben (and, more importantly, the mindset that it represents) is, even more than Hitler, the villain of World War II” (85). Extending the idea of imperialism to the atomic level, “[...] Pynchon equates the objectification, manipulation and control of nature with the death of nature” (88). Schaub’s reading focuses on the discursive environment in which Pynchon composed *Gravity’s Rainbow*, focusing on the ecological awareness that followed the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*. Carson’s book famously equates the widespread use of deadly chemicals to atomic warfare, the ultimate image of corporate or state death at the time. These examples from the yet small body of ecocritical work on Pynchon show a tendency to focus on the deadly serious aspects of Pynchon’s novel, the tragic imminent failure of resisting corporate power. By and large ecocritics are not concerned with Pynchon’s use of parody, irony, humor, or what these techniques mean for a reading of nature in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. I argue that these ludic and self-reflexive techniques are essential for understanding nonhuman nature in the novel.

Pynchon’s playful prose serves a purpose that speaks directly to ecocritics’ desire to find hope in the novel for resistance to the Cartel and its machinations. In the words of Roger Henkle, Pynchon systematically reduces

"[...] the fearful into the playful," his project is "Control of the ominous by converting it imaginatively into a subject for ludicrous parody of all its elements" (274). Henkle uses as his prime example the moment at the beginning of the novel in which Pirate Prentiss, alerted to an incoming rocket, races to gather as many bananas from his rooftop garden as he can. His hungover flatmates are still asleep as he begins to cook up an "outrageous" Banana Breakfast. The smell of breakfast, the multitudinous cockamamy banana-genic concoctions are a kind of affirmation of life: "It is not often that Death is told so clearly to fuck off" (*GR* 10). In his excellent article, "The Morning and the Evening Funnies: Comedy in *Gravity's Rainbow*," Henkle examines how Pynchon uses comedy, arguing that "Comedy saves us through such rituals of language and quick change [as Pirate Prentice's song-and-dance routine in *GR* 13-15]; we pass off the horrors by distracting ourselves from them" (Henkle 275). According to Henkle's article, Pynchon creates silly, chaotic situations and follows them with reminders of the futility of escaping fate: he follows the comedic with the tragic to show the ultimately ephemeral nature of resistance. "Pynchon's use of comedy suggests, in fact, that Western man finds himself more and more caught up in the analogies of his own discoveries in physics and technology," which become the "Great Substitution" for more mysterious explanations for human behavior (276, 277). Humans are, according to various forces in the novel, as determined as Pavlov's dogs or the grid. Comedy, with its emphasis on play and chaos, "is the most appropriate means of registering our internalized disquiet over the uneasy relationship that we have toward our increasingly mechanized existence, and our

futile projections in response to it" (278). Comedy allows us to re-enter a primordial, mythological "green world" for a moment "in which the vicissitudes of normal existence are suspended and an aura of innocence, freedom, and delight envelopes everything" (279), giving us a fleeting escape. Part of this escape is a denial of linear cause and effect - which Henkle traces back to Bergson, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche - which are the bones and sinew of technological society. Henkle cites Gerhardt von Göll's dream of creating a movie that runs backward to resurrect the dead (a particularly beautiful and comi-tragic image) and Mexico's statistical skepticism as examples of Pynchon's thematic concern with nonlinear causality. Nonlinear causality stands opposed to a world in which "we are responsible for the shape of our societies and our lives," it is "anarchic, free-wheeling" (287), but ultimately born of victimization. Our desire to return to the "green world" that we express through comedy is a symptom of unhappiness in the modern world in which we are trapped. Where Henkle sees an escape or temporary respite, I see something different. I agree with Henkle that humor can be a coping mechanism for the novel's dehumanized characters, but I argue that it also represents true resistance. As Henkle rightly observes, "Seriousness is deadly in Pynchon's universe [...]" (274); humor is irrepressible life. It is indeed a "green world" that humor invokes throughout the novel, but if that world is primordial, it isn't timeless in the way that Henkle argues, but a perpetually-overfull reservoir of life pitted against death, against the They-System.

Pynchon alludes frequently to Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, in which he argues that Hellene and Greek tragedy sprang from the conflict between two

competing cultural ideas: the Dionysian and the Apollonian. The god Apollo, “as the god of all shaping energies, is also the soothsaying god. He, who [...] is the ‘shining one,’ the deity of light, also rules over the fair appearance of the inner world of fantasies” (*BoT* 3), he is thus the god of dreaming, of the plastic arts, and of contemplation. The Apollonian designates then the tendency to abstraction, to individuation, analysis, the visual. Dionysus is the god of nature, of ecstasy, and of loss of self. The Dionysian names a series of images and states that revolve around the merging of the self with others and with nature. Nietzsche describes the “blissful ecstasy which arises from the depths of man, ay, of nature, at [the] collapse of the *principium individuationis* [...]” which he associates with drunkenness. “It is either under the influence of the narcotic draught, of which the hymns of all primitive men and peoples tell us, or by the powerful approach of spring penetrating all nature with joy, that those Dionysian emotions awake, in the augmentation of which the subjective vanishes to complete self-forgetfulness” (4). Dionysus is associated specifically with music as well. Thomas Schaub, examining the vaudevillian arguments between Saure Bummer and Gustav Schlabone concerning Beethoven and Rossini, argues that *Gravity’s Rainbow* is “deeply Nietzschean” (“Atonalism, Nietzsche...” 32) and that Pynchon bases Bummer’s distaste of Beethoven on Nietzsche’s critique of Wagner. Nietzsche “associates Wagner with the Christian need for redemption, self-denial, the desire to be rid of oneself – the opposite of ‘noble morality’ that ‘is rooted in a triumphant Yes to oneself – it is self-affirmation, self-glorification of life” (33). Schaub links the Nietzschean strands in the novel to the natural world,

but doesn't follow these links to Pynchon's use of comedy. He tells us that "Pynchon has aligned characters such as Saure and Slothrop and Geli Tripping with the Dionysian forces of life, and the dreamers of transcendence, notably Captain Weissmann, with the Apollonian" (34). Yves-Marie Léonet includes Dr. Pointsman among Pynchon's Apollonian characters, as a believer in strict laws of cause and effect and as evincing a "Socratic optimism" (Léonet 39), Socrates being the apotheosis of Apollonian rationality in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Schaub connects the Pynchon's Nietzschean critique of Apollonian rationality to his critique of Western civilization, arguing that Pynchon "literalizes the metaphor, placing Gottfried within the Apollonian plastic of the Impolex shroud" (35). Plasticity, the province of Apollo, "came to represent everything false and non-biodegradable" (36) in the 1960s. Pynchon also alludes directly to the Apollonian, titling one of the final chapters, "Strung Into the Apollonian Dream..." (*GR* 769). Because I am not as concerned with how Pynchon treats the metaphor of the Apollonian specifically, I will leave off here, only adding that he strongly equates this impulse with the System (which, systems themselves are concepts, or abstractions) and thus its tendency toward Death. Schaub specifically mentions Geli Tripping and Tyrone Slothrop as characters whom Pynchon associates with Dionysian imagery.

Through Tripping's perspective, especially, Pynchon depicts in literal terms the tropes – drunkenness, one-ness, the Full – that Nietzsche claims for the impulse. Geli connects to nature in a way that few characters do (with the exception Slothrop for a short while) and is silly in what I would argue is a

redeeming sense. Margaret Lynd argues that Geli is a “metaphor and synecdoche for ‘lovable but scatterbrained Mother Nature’” (Lynd 70), a position that has historically not favored women. Lynd contrasts Pynchon’s characterization of Geli with those of his other female characters, and indeed Geli is more agentive, is less driven by pathos or history than other women in the novel. And unlike all other characters in the novel, with the exception of Weissman, she actually achieves her objectives, she uses her magic to ensnare Tchitcherine and prevents a deadly confrontation between him and Enzian. I focus on Geli here because although she figuratively represents nature, she is less a victim of history than women more immersed in culture, or involved with cultural production. Pynchon gives her agency in connection with her closeness to nature: she has more power and mounts an effective resistance to the They-System, and so as one of the few successful insurgents, she deserves special consideration.

Geli’s agency doesn’t come solely from her intimacy with the natural world. As we have seen, other characters or groups who are close to the natural world - as we will see, the Schwarzkommando are an excellent example here - are crushed by Them, or cannot avoid a deathward trajectory. Geli is an agent because she rejects Their Apollonian rationality, the seductive logic of the Rocket, in favor of Dionysian irrationality. In an oft-quoted passage, Pynchon describes Geli’s glimpse into the world as a Dionysian ecstasy, as an orgiastic confrontation with primal nature and Apollonian rationality as a corrective:

This is the World just before men. Too violently pitched alive in constant flow ever to be seen by men directly. They are meant only

to look at it dead, in still strata, transputrefied to oil or coal. Alive, it was a threat: it was Titans, was an overpeaking of life so clangorous and mad, such a green corona about Earth's body that some spoiler *had* to be brought in before it blew the Creation apart. [...] It was something we had to work on, historically and personally. To build from scratch up to its present status as reaction, nearly as strong as life, holding down the green uprising. (GR 734, emphasis in original)

Pynchon ties together here nature ("the World just before men"), the absurd ("clangorous and mad"), and rebellion ("green uprising"). Man cannot behold this verdant cacophony directly, but, tellingly, finds it in the coal and oil from which Imipolex G is synthesized. The "green uprising" *resists* the encroachments of the System: it is a foil and an ineradicable enemy and, in many places in the book, pushes back through Dionysian drunkenness and absurdity.

Pynchon loves drunkenness. We have no idea what his own feelings are about personally getting drunk, but there is plenty of beer flowing through *Gravity's Rainbow*. The first scene at Pirate Prentiss's flat opens on his roommates in various stages of hung-over disarray, one falling from his previous-night's impromptu bedroll along the second floor railing to the first floor below, saved only by Prentiss's swift action. At the Casino Herman Goering on the French Riviera, at the Chicago in Berlin, on the streets of Nordhausen, inside the Mittlewerks rocket assembly, on and on, Pynchon keeps his characters' cups full. Further, drugs like Oneiron and hash figure heavily in the action of the plot, as well as descriptively evoke ecological and Nietzschean themes. Intoxication (either by drinking or drug use) does two things in the novel: first, in the fine tradition of vaudevillian drunken fools, it catalyzes slapstick humor; second, intoxication dissolves the self into a Dionysian feeling of one-ness. This first



aspect is an example of the Dionysian's power of *subversion*, and is a metonym for the working of a lot of slapstick humor in the novel.

Drunken characters, or characters who put drunkenness to their own use, undermine the System throughout the novel. The best example of this kind of subversion is in the Casino Hermann Goering, where Slothrop organizes a drinking game in order to uncover the conspiracy he senses keeping him at the casino. Figuring that "They are springing for it" (215), he turns Their two-faced generosity to his advantage. Revelers fall over, fall asleep, "At least three fist-fights are in progress" (216): the situation quickly degenerates into madness. Slothrop crawls among the barstools, finds the lackey Sr. Stephen Dodson-Truck who has been observing him for PISCES and takes him outside, only to find "[...] the kind of sunset you hardly see any more, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century wilderness sunset, a few of which got set down, approximated, on canvas, landscapes of the American West by artists nobody ever heard of, when the land was still free and the eye innocent, and the presence of the Creator much more direct" (217). This sudden change in tone, from the "Vulgar Song" and silliness of the party-goers to the ekphrastic description of the sunset in terms of American landscape painting, is jarring, but it establishes the causality between intoxication and sublimity: sublimity as access to the more-than-human world. Pynchon tells us that "robed figures" like that which "stood over Lübeck during the Palm Sunday raid," supernatural beings have come to "bear witness" (217). It seems that Nature itself is on hand. The sudden outbreak of a party, the gonzo results of the drinking game expose and thus foil the conspiracy for the moment – they quickly

let Slothrop loose into the Zone – and invoke the presence of Nature personified in these Titanic beings.

Intoxication catalyzes absurdity. Although characters associated with the System do get drunk, drunkenness tends to favor the Preterite and Nature. In the Mittlewerk, Slothrop stumbles onto the main assembly plant for the A4. He finds Marvy's Mothers and Russian troops drinking Marvy's health out of clipped nose cone assemblies, doled out by a "gnome-sized German civilian with a red von Hindenburg mustache" (309). The soldiers drink and sing Rocket Limericks in which engineers have often disastrous sex with various parts of the Rocket:

There was a young fellow named Hector,  
Who was fond of a launcher-erector.  
But the squishes and pops  
Of acute pressure drops  
Wrecked Hector's hydraulic connector. (311)

"Drunks are hanging from steel ladders and draped over catwalks" (310).

Slothrop zip-lines from the hall above into the revelry, realizing only too late that Major Marvy's sitting in the middle of it. This launches an extended, brilliant, cinematic chase scene in which Marvy's Mothers pursue Slothrop back to the surface through the tunnels of the Mittlewerk, their proximity indicated by the echo of the limericks they *continue to sing* even as they chase him. A series of cartoonish dodges and Wile E Coyote stunts later, he finds a way out. But even escaping Nordhausen in a hot air balloon, "faintly, comes the singing of Furies:

There was a young man named McGuire,  
Who was fond of the pitch amplifier.  
But a number of shorts  
Left him covered with warts,  
And set half the bedroom on fire. (339)

And sure enough, the Mothers are *hanging out* of the “rusty old reconnaissance plane” waving beer. Slothrop and his companion, a black market pie (as in “banana cream”) smuggler, foil their chase with cartoonishly well-aimed pies to both the windshield and engine, sending the Mothers screaming profanities back to earth. Beer saves Slothrop’s life, as a machine-gunned keg spills its contents at the beginning of the chase, tripping the American soldiers and giving Slothrop a head start. One suspects, too, that a more sober pilot would have been less easily shaken.

But perhaps the most poignant example of intoxication’s – and the Dionysian’s – subversive potential is the scene in which Slothrop, Klaus Närrisch, a rocket engineer whose name literally means “Quixotic,” “foolish,” or “harebrained,” a band of black marketeers, and a circus troop featuring a troop of performing chimpanzees and dancing girls jail-break Der Springer from Soviet custody. After Slothrop and Der Springer arrive at Peenemünde on a black market smuggling ship, the Soviet Army takes Der Springer prisoner. The chimps escape in the ensuing confusion, having broken into a shipment of vodka, in an absolutely zany and cartoonish scene of mayhem. Slothrop and Närrisch use the pandemonium as a distraction and mount a rescue. The dancers and chimps and booze distract the guards long enough for Slothrop and Närrisch to infiltrate the base and rescue Der Springer, using bottles of vodka as ersatz Molotov cocktails.

Pynchon’s cinematic presentation is supremely effective in this scene, wrangling characters, arranging sight gags, ratcheting up the tension as

“Springer blows a tremendous fart that echoes for minutes across the historic ellipse, like now to do for you folks my anal impression of the A4” (522). In another cinematic moment, we hear (ish) the music and merry-making of the distracted soldiers fall silent, and the Soviet army comes charging to the shore. The chimps, musicians, and girls rejoin the main characters en route to the beach. They rendezvous with the ship, but Närrish stays behind to fend off the Soviets. The scene turns tragic, with Närrish defending the rear in full knowledge that he will die... perhaps. There is a break in the text as the perspective shifts from Slothrop to Närrish and the narrator, out of the blue, it seems, invokes John Dillinger.

Slothrop’s transformation into the Racketemensch follows from his smoking a reefer with Säure Bummer, Trudi, and Magda: in an extended allusion to American Prohibition, they go to The Chicago bar (Chicago, Illinois was the unofficial center of the black market in alcohol during Prohibition), where massive photos of John Dillinger “alone or posed with his mother, his pals, his tommygun, decorate the walls” (374); this leads to Slothrop’s infiltration of the Yalta Conference in the Soviet Zone to look for several pounds of hash. Dillinger reappears later in the novel, once as an aside, and again during the end of Der Springer’s escape from Peenemünde, when Pynchon describes Dillinger’s ambush by Melvin Purvis while leaving the Biograph Theatre. Here, the episode acts as a kind of bridge into the engineer Närrisch’s perspective as he faces off against the pursuing Soviet forces (I will discuss this episode again below). And finally, in a scene that recalls the mythical dismemberment of the god Dionysus,

Seaman Bodine describes to Slothrop (by this point, Slothrop is fading out of our bandwidth altogether) the scene after Purvis's ambush:

I was there that night, right down the street from the Biograph, I heard the gunfire, everything. [...] Out of the bars, the toilets, the alleys, dames holding their skirts up so they could run faster, Missus Krodobly who's drinking her way through the Big Depression, waitin' till the sun shines thru, and whatta you know, there's half my graduating class from Great Lakes, in dress blues with the same bedspring marks as mine, and there's longtime hookers and pockmark fags with breath smelling like the inside of a motorman's glove, old ladies from Back of the Yards, subdebs just out the movies with the sweat still cold on their thighs, gate, *everybody* was there. They were taking off clothes, tearing checks out of checkbooks, ripping off pieces of each others' newspaper, just so they could soak up some of John Dillinger's blood. We went crazy. (755)

Dillinger is more than a symbol of fleeting resistance, "He went out and socked Them right in the toilet privacy of Their banks. Who cares what he was *thinking* about, long as it didn't get in the way? [...] Yeah, what we need isn't *right reasons* [my emphasis], but just that *grace*" (756). Dillinger not only represents the god Dionysus here, but actually becomes him. He re-enacts his dismemberment: bystanders flock his body and share in an analogy of pulling him apart. The crowd is "crazy," unified in this purpose, an impromptu orgiastic sharing of their despair. Bodine recognizes Dillinger's divinity when he gives Slothrop a relic, the shirt that bears some of the outlaw's blood.

Traces of Dillinger and other gangster figures real and fictional pop up over and over, from the Chicago Bar and Dillinger to references to James Cagney and Clark Gable, the mission to jail-break Der Springer, and even details of characters' dialogue, such as when Roger Mexico, invading Pointsman's office, uses an intrusive "see" while addressing the frightened secretary (645).

Dillinger is the kind of “Badass” that Pynchon argues for in “Is It O.K. To Be A Luddite?” For Pynchon, the badass is a figure of resistance, but also someone with an intrinsically comic MO. Describing Ned Lud, the historical inspiration for the term “Luddite,” Pynchon tells us, “historical Ned Lud was well absorbed into the more or less sarcastic nickname ‘King (or Captain) Ludd,’ and was now all mystery, resonance and dark fun: a more-than-human presence, out in the night [...]” (“Luddite”). Pynchon calls his crusade against hosiery frames a “shtick,” a slapstick compulsion, a fitting description of Dillinger’s, erm, propensity for robbing banks. Both Lud and Dillinger (and King Kong, according to Pynchon) are badasses, comic Robin Hoods, “Bad meaning not morally evil, necessarily, more like able to work mischief on a large scale.” (“Luddite”). The word “mischief” is perfect for our analysis here, as it implies rascality, light-hearted criminality. It hearkens to Proverbs for Paranoids #1: “You may never get to touch the Master, but you can tickle his creatures” (*GR* 240), tilting at the outskirts of the Man’s schemes. Dillinger is a kind of tragic example of someone who represents embodied resistance. Dillinger is only finally penetrated by the System, he doesn’t undergo the same sustained invasion as, for example, Slothrop, whose natural body has been long coopted, right down to “The Penis He Thought Was His Own.”

The narrator tells us that Dillinger, “[...] at the end, found a few seconds’ strange mercy in the movie images that hadn’t quite yet faded from his eyeballs – Clark Gable going off unregenerate to fry in the chair” (524). Närrish, facing off against the Soviet army pursuing Slothrop and Der Springer, doesn’t think about

this, but we get the sense that his doomed resistance against the onslaught is somehow redeemed by his participation in the tradition of badassery: “[...] there was still for the doomed man some shift of personality in effect – the way you’ve felt for a little while afterward in the real muscles of your face and voice, that you *were* Gable [...] – to help Dillinger through the bushwhacking, and a little easier into death” (525). Närrish takes on the persona of a badass, his imminent death a little easier to take but still no less sad. Pynchon uses the humor of the preceding scene, with its carnival-esque procession of drunken chimps and scantily-clad women, to heighten the effect on the reader of Närrish’s demise off-screen. At the same time, the invocation of Dillinger’s name legitimizes Närrish’s sacrifice and brings its own sort of humor, a darkly redemptive humor where the doomed man becomes the handsome American screen actor snapping off one-liners: “Die like ya live – all of a sudden, don’t drag it out” (524).

Considering this confluence of death and humor, I would like to return to the question of whether humor is just a temporary reprieve from the System’s relentless, unstoppable repression. The tragic aspects of the novel are undeniable but also less acute than at first glance. Pynchon’s novel is more hopeful than is generally assumed and his Dionysian view of nature is our reason for hope, and an important part of that vision is music. Music permeates the novel. If the whole book is the framed narration of a movie, the movie itself has to be a musical. There are foxtrots, waltzes, ballads, a few explicitly movie-style numbers, spirituals, sea chanties, hymns - the novel is always just on the cusp of breaking out in song. Just like in a musical, music in the novel “breaks out”:

there is generally little warning that a song is coming. They often function as light-hearted interruptions that break the gravitas of over-serious scenes, such as the song “Sold On Suicide” that interrupts Christian Ombindi’s pitch for racial suicide to Oberst Enzian: “Well I don’t care-for, th’ things I eat,/Can’t stand that boogie-woogie beat -/ But I’m sold, on, *suicide* (324, emphasis in original) - which is perhaps played only in Enzian’s head, but we aren’t given definitive confirmation. The song fades out and the paragraph continues, citing Goedel’s Theorem and reducing the premise of the song, “a fair renunciation of the things of the world” that justifies self-annihilation, to absurdity (325), putting off the actual act of suicide off indefinitely. The singer - Enzian? A background chorus? - by default affirms life: there is room yet, slim hope.

Although Pynchon uses music for many purposes throughout the novel, Preterite characters do most of the singing, and musical themes most often support resistance to the System. In some places, music simply gives Preterite characters the opportunity to express their own views, as in the displaced persons’ Train Song. Webley Silvernail witnesses Pointsman’s caged mice, experimental animals, break out in a musical number entitled, “Pavlovnia (Beguine)”:

It was spring in Pavlovnia-a-a,  
I was lost, in a maze...  
Lysol breezes perfumed the air,  
I’d been searching for days. [...] (232)

They have “[...] grown to Webley Silvernail-size (though none of the lab people seem to be noticing) to dance him down the long aisles and metal apparatus [...]” (232) like a particularly bleak and Latin Rogers and Hammerstein musical. They



dance, synchronized, forming “chrysanthemum and sunburst patterns, eventually all form into the shape of a single giant mouse, at whose eye Silvernail poses with a smile, arms up in a V” (233). But after the song is over, the mice go back to their cages and Pointsman’s experiments – Pynchon establishes a pattern early of Pointsman mistreating animals. The song is just a momentary reprieve: “Now it’s back to the cages and the rationalized forms of death – death in the service of the one species cursed with the knowledge that it will die...” (233). This seems to support the reading that the novel is fundamentally hopeless, that its comic antics are just frontages along the real road. But A) the mice do get their moment to sing, B) the episode seems to have deeply affected Silvernail, who has something of an ecological epiphany:

I would set you free, if I know how. But it isn’t free out here. All the animals, the plants, the minerals, even other kinds of men, are being broken and reassembled every day, to preserve an elite few, who are the loudest to theorize on freedom, but the least free of all. I can’t even give you hope that it will be different someday – that They’ll come out, and forget death, and lose Their technology’s elaborate terror, and stop using every other form of life without mercy to keep what haunts men down to a tolerable level – and be like you instead, simply here, simply alive...” (233)

Certainly this is a bleak worldview. My argument is that the music represents more than a momentary escape, but a continuing resistance, representative of the “green uprising” discussed above. Silvernail is himself too implicated, too embedded in the system to be able to see it in the same way as more liberated characters, such as Tripping and Slothrop and (arguably) Tchitcherine, who have direct experience of the riotous immortality of life. The song and its humble section – no real movement forward in the plot at all here – do illustrate how the

absurd musical interludes (and the comic in general, as in the case of Närrisch's last stand) can actually accentuate the tragic action of the plot.

More representative of Pynchon's uses of music in the novel, however, are the musical aspects of Seaman Bodine and Roger Mexico's infiltration of an Elect dinner in "The Counterforce," as well the songs that form the core of the Kirghiz Light episode. These scenes demonstrate the functions of music in the novel; in the one, music and slapstick comedy combine to help Bodine and Mexico, spying for the Counterforce, escape the clutches of the Elect; in the Kirghiz Light episode, there are two songs in quick succession that between them attenuate the potential for tragedy, as well as reveal a Dionysian connection to the earth. Both of these episodes, the escape and Tchitcherine's quest, feature music's connection to the Preterite and to nature, Pynchon using both plot action and descriptive detail to link them.

We're not sure why Mexico and Bodine have chosen to infiltrate this dinner, but it's clear that they're in quite a bit of danger, with the hosts ostentatiously preparing a Mexico-sized roasting pit. From the beginning of the episode, Pynchon renders the scene in a comic, almost surreal style – for example, Bodine's zoot suit requires coat hangers to keep the gargantuan shoulders elevated and hidden zippers to even be able to put his feet through the pant legs and is "BLUE: *paint-blue*" – but what I find interesting here is that the musical accompaniment for the evening is "the suppressed quartet from the Haydn Op. 76, the so-called 'Kazoo' Quartet in G-Flat Minor" (724, 725). The music is strange and silly, requiring the musicians, tonight the dooper Gustav

Schlabone among them, to abandon their regular instruments partway through the piece for kazoos. The piece is itself a bit of slapstick, a nod to cartoons:

They don't want you listening to too much of that stuff – at least not the way Haydn presents it (a strange lapse in the revered composer's behavior): cello, violin, alto and trble kazoos all rollicking along in a tune sounds like a song from the movie *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, "You Should See Me Dance the Polka," when suddenly in the middle of an odd bar the kazoos *just stop completely*, and the Outer Voices fall to plucking a non-melody that tradition sez represent two 18<sup>th</sup>-century Village Idiots vibrating their lower lips. At each other. (emphases in original, 726)

The executives and movers and shakers at the dinner are perplexed by the music, they don't seem properly moved. The narrator tells us that this is "the background music for what is about to transpire" (728), which, as it turns out, is Bodine and Mexico grossing out the assembled guests by yelling out a menu of bodily fluid-based appetizers, entrées, and desserts, such as "snot soup," "menstrual marmalade," "succulent slime sausage" (729, 730). Soon, the journalist Commando Connie joins in, as well as the musicians, taking a break from their kazoos, which have been vibrating away the whole time. The hall becomes a vomitorium as guests start dashing from their places, spraying bile and semi-digested hors d'oeuvres. Having escaped death, Mexico and Bodine march triumphantly out through the door with the musicians, "kazoos and strings accompanying the Disgusting Duo" (731).

This scene brings together the ideas of music and slapstick, and aligns the two with the Preterite. In doing so, Pynchon shows us the limitations of Dionysian rebellion: it can resist, perhaps foil and even overthrow, but beyond that, the power of slapstick to *create* is uncertain, despite its connections to

nature. Throughout the episode, the narrator brings our attention back to the dubious loyalties of the Counterforce. In one famous passage, the narrator tells us that the Counterforce is “[...] as schizoid, as double-minded in the massive presence of money as any of the rest of us, that’s the hard fact.” He continues, “The Man has a branch office in each of our brains, his corporate emblem is a white albatross, each local rep has a cover known as the Ego, and their mission in this world is Bad Shit” (727): the narrator suggests that we are too compromised to truly resist – that the System not only controls us but is part of us. Part of the pathos of this scene, perhaps all the slapstick and tragedy in the novel, stems from the feeling the narrator cultivates that perhaps all resistance is futile, or not really resistance, or what does it even mean to resist something of which you are (almost) willingly a part? According to this reading, the prevailing view, the music and comedy of *Gravity’s Rainbow* is nothing more than a distraction, a ruse, Adorno’s culture industry affirming itself through gentle self-mockery and pie throwing. This is why the externality of the natural world to the human – the “World just before Man” that some characters can perceive, and which, we have seen, seems to align itself with the Preterite – is so important: the sublime (terrifying, awesome in the original sense), the Dionysian moment of rapture that music and slapstick both conjure in the novel are all the more important because they exist entirely apart from the System, and as such, as much as any character can come into contact with Dionysian Nature, they bypass the Man’s inside rep. Comedy and music, exhorting the individual into community, defy the *principium individuationis*.

Early in the novel, Tchitcherine arrives at a small village in Kazakhstan, searching for the secret to finding the Kirghiz Light and witnesses an “ajtus – a singing dual” (361) between a girl and boy. The dual itself roughly resembles “playing the dozens,” “carrying on a mocking well-I-sort-of-like-you-even-if-there’s-one-or-two-weird-things-about-you-for-instance-kind of game” (316). The dual goes on for a while, with the two contestants reconciling at the end: “What might have been a village apocalypse has gone on now into comic cooperation, as between a pair of vaudeville comedians” (362). The girl gently demurs the offer of marriage in the song at the end, singing,

Did I hear you mention a marriage?  
 Here there has been a marriage –  
 This warm circle of song,  
 Boisterous, loud as any marriage... (362)

The narrator tells us that, “[...] Tchitcherine understands, abruptly, that soon someone will come out and begin to write some of these down in the New Turkic Alphabet he helped frame... and this is how they will be lost” (362), lending to the scene the miasma of passing that pervades the novel, the sense of loss that accompanies Progress.

But for now we just have the two singers: the hetero-normative back-and-forth is playful until the boy, exasperated by the girl’s cutting remarks about his rotund steed, threatens her with violence. The girl deflects the threat with another verse and the song continues. Music here does several things: within the temporal bounds of the verse format and within the circle in the middle of the village that they occupy, the singers sublimate conflict, keep a spirit of play alive against invasions – Tchitcherine’s, here. Music reconciles the two singers, the

format of the dual demands their eventual reconciliation, but the final say goes to the girl, who has refrained from violence. Her demurral emphasizes coming-together beyond the nuptial, the song is a celebration of the village as a community, itself a spell against cold, against violence. Further, the song narrates a transition from conflict, the *principium individuationis*, to “comedic cooperation,” combining the realization of oneness with the power of humor to resolve tension, in Nietzsche’s parlance literally “dissonance” (*BoT* 105).

Coming together is the Dionysian trait par excellence, and it is the unifying factor among many of the novel’s songs. The song immediately following the atjus is the narrative of an aqyn, a village elder/singer, of his experience of the Kirghiz Light. He sings, that he has returned from “the edge of the world,” and that what he has seen gives him “[...] a fear in my heart so sharp / It will cut the strongest of metals” (363). The Light reveals itself “In a place where words are unknown, / And eyes shine like candles at night, / And the face of God is a presence / Behind the mask of the sky” (363), an image that will recur in the Slothrop family hymn sung at the end. For now, the light seems like a sublimity that occurs only in the wild, least civilized corners of the world. But it also echoes the ecological-Dionysian sense of intense oneness with everything that we have seen throughout the novel. He sings, “[...] the Kirghiz Light took my eyes, / Now I sense all Earth like a baby” (364). This line could mean either the literal privation of his senses, or it can mean that the light has turned back the clock on his perception of the world, like an innocent child before its indoctrination and separation from nature. The aqyn’s description of the Light – the blindness, fear,

the penetrating feeling of being One – echoes in Geli Tripping’s encounter with Pan: “Suddenly, Pan – leaping – its face too beautiful to bear, beautiful Serpent, its coils in rainbow lashings in the sky – into the sure bones of fright” (735).

These sublime experiences represent the truly redemptive qualities of music in the novel, music guiding the characters away from the System, away from the gray or plastic separation from nature into ecstatic, perhaps terrifying contact with the natural world. Pynchon argues that despite our indoctrination, “A few keep going over to the Titans every day, in their striving subcreation [...]”:

In harsh-edged echo, Titans stir far below. They are all the presences we are not supposed to be seeing – wind gods, hilltop gods, sunset gods – that we train ourselves away from to keep from looking further even though enough of us do, leave Their electric voices behind in the twilight at the edge of the town and move into the constantly parted cloak of our nightwalk. (735)

These images, of “the face of God [...] behind the mask of the sky,” of gods whom we are not meant to see, an entire animated world just underneath and behind the grey cloak of Mäyā, these will come back in the final song, Slothrop’s family hymn.

The final scenes of the novel formally perform the acceleration of an A-4 rocket in flight. Critics have read this as a disintegration that parallels Slothrop’s own personal scattering a historiographic statement on Pynchon’s part that history after WWII rushes toward nuclear apocalypse. The scenes of “Chase Music,” in which American comic book heroes such as Superman and the Submariner rush too late to the rescue, only ratify our immanent doom: our mythologies aren’t even up to the task of understanding, let alone preventing the System’s eschatological designs. Pynchon structures these final scenes around

the firing of the Nazi Weissman's Rocket #00000, which bears his lover Gottfried inside, wrapped in a "shroud" (769) of Imipolex G. As the rocket descends in the movie, the film cuts out and the audience starts yelling for more. Another rocket is descending on the actual theatre, however, although the moviegoers can't have any idea that this is the case, since the rocket travels faster than sound, "falling nearly a mile per second, absolutely and forever without sound, reaches its last unmeasurable gap above the roof of this old theatre, the last delta-t" (775). Somehow, the narrator knows that the rocket is coming – perhaps it is just the *threat* of annihilation that hangs over the theater in the last scene, the inevitable crash at the end of history's trajectory.

Pynchon doesn't choose to end the novel with this image, despite its closure, its return to the opening image of a rocket in ascent, and this is why we can read the novel as more optimistic than is traditionally assumed. Pynchon, through the narrator, gives the last word to a hymn, "one They never taught anyone to sing, a hymn by William Slothrop, centuries forgotten and out of print" (775). The song is primordial, hereditary, or something spontaneous – it is out of print and forgotten, so that even the narrator can only know it through species memory or inspiration; it has to be remembered, pointing to Dionysian Oneness, a collective unconscious. The hymn's lyrics are hopeful, a good Christian call to faith in the natural world, a world that is ensouled, something we have already seen in the song of the aqyn as well in the Dionysian visions of Geli Tripping. It is a promise of cosmic payback: the Elect will fall before a redeeming light that reestablishes the human connection to nature. The song ends with a call to



togetherness, for the combined moviegoers and readers to join in song, for us to throw off the *principium individuationis*. Ultimately, the song is what Amy Elias calls a “subjunctive” history, a moment of doubt, a place where “multiple possibilities of interpretation coexist simultaneously” (Elias 129). These spaces are “unsettling, uncanny, but also liberating [...] evading definition and control [...]” (129). The Slothrop family hymn is an alternative future set against the “last delta-t” of the rocket’s flight, ultimately, a spell that conjures the power of the natural world against falling objects. It goes:

There is a Hand to turn the time,  
Thought thy Glass today be run,  
Till the Light that hath brought the Towers low  
Find the last poor Pret’rite one...  
Till the Riders sleep by ev’ry road,  
All through our crippl’d Zone,  
With a face on ev’ry mountainside,  
And a Soul in ev’ry stone....

Now everybody – (776)

## CONCLUSION

### THE MAD-AND-MERRIEST YEA TO LIFE

I chose these novels because they are about nature. They are not tangentially about nature, the natural world isn't a sideshow. Both Pynchon and Nabokov write about what nature means for us humans specifically. Both authors are, in their unique and beautiful ways, concerned with what nature does or can do for us, us poor limited beings. For Pynchon, nature is a fount of resistance to the Apollonian desire to control and destroy. For Nabokov, nature is the source of all aesthetic production, either directly (in the case of Batesian mimicry) or through art that mimics nature.

These novels aren't quite the political beasts that environmentalism, the birthplace of ecocriticism, holds in high regard. *Gravity's Rainbow*, which exhibits a very keen ecological awareness, is almost too strange and metaphysical to have an easily identified political point, and its often opaque or labyrinthine prose proscribes any possibility of its having mass appeal. It is difficult to assign any particular project to Pynchon's text. While I argue that Pynchon sees Nature as a counter to the totalizing control systems of the modern world, this isn't a call for rebellion – the process he describes and lauds is literally primordial. With regard to *Pale Fire*, its themes and construction are such that it seems to want to deny

politics entirely. The novel's argument that humans mimic nature and natural processes in producing cultural artifacts is more philosophical and aesthetic than biophilic. My point is exactly that these aren't traditionally politically useful texts for ecocriticism, qua political criticism. For ecocriticism as a mode of inquiry into the portrayal of, use of, and intrusion of nature in/to art, these texts are more important.

I had originally read both novels expecting traditional post-Carsonian environmental awareness. But they surprised me, as books often do, and instead suggested this approach: they are purposely useless, almost subversively so. This is perhaps their most powerful borrowing from Nietzsche. These two novels are about beauty and joy and boisterous life, confirming Nietzsche's assertion in *The Birth of Tragedy* that,

[T]he more clearly I perceive in nature those all-powerful art impulses, and in them a fervent longing for appearance, for redemption through appearance, the more I feel myself driven to the metaphysical assumption that the Verily-Existent and Primordial Unity, as the Eternally Suffering and Self-Contradictory, requires the rapturous vision, the joyful appearance, for its continuous salvation. (12)

Both novels frame nature with the language of rapture and redemption, as though life itself were an imperative to artistic production. Whatever the theoretical trajectory one takes with regard to *Pale Fire*, the novel is about making the fantastic, literally stealing inspiration – as we have seen – from nature itself. We must look to nature, the natural objects populating the novel, the natural metaphors that structure our reading of the novel, such as the bot fly, to find sources of the characters' artistic impulses. Contrary to a more obviously

politically relevant demand for the preservation of the natural world, Nabokov and Pynchon ask for our appreciation, perhaps our participation in producing “organic miracles,” our oath in joining the rebellion.

Neither Pynchon nor Nabokov demand that we cease using plastics or that we ban nukes, but urge us to find in the natural world Nietzsche’s riotous affirmation of life. He opposes this affirmation to the “[...] *degenerating* instinct which, with subterranean vindictiveness, turns against life [...]” (*BoT* 111) which describes the They-System of the Elect in *Gravity’s Rainbow* nearly perfectly. The Slothrop family’s fortune, dependent as it is upon grimly mining the New England countryside for wood and rock, dwindles to the point where the family patriarch literally sells his own son, Slothrop, to Laslo Jamf in order to pay his way through Harvard. Pynchon explicitly intertwines their exploitation of the natural world and their progressive material and spiritual impoverishment. For Nietzsche, affirmation and cheerfulness are powerful ideas: “This final, cheerfullest, exuberantly mad-and-merriest Yea to life is not only the highest insight, it is also the *deepest*, it is that which is most rigorously confirmed and upheld by truth and science” (111). This is the Nietzschean philosophy that first seduced me personally, one that refuses to ignore negativity, but shouts merrily in its face. But the question is whether simply affirming the inherent beauty of life (here, we come close to Nietzsche’s Kantian ancestry) qualifies as a coherent *environmentalist* position, or at least a worthwhile object of study for ecocritics.

The problem is that while appreciating beauty in nature is important, nature as a category encompasses everything from Nabokov’s *Vanessa atalanta*

to the molecules that comprise Pynchon's Imipolex G. The trap awaiting us is that if Nietzsche merely asks us to appreciate nature, we lack the grounds for anything resembling critique, which is an undeniable part of ecocriticism's D.N.A. We can equally appreciate the molting of cicadas as we can the bloom of an atomic explosion.

There are two responses to this problem. The first is just that the aesthetic argument has proven quite effective as a conservation tool: without the paintings of Thomas Moran to extoll the beauty of Yellowstone, we might not now have a Yellowstone National Park; without John Muir's elaborate writings on the Hetch Hetchy Valley, the modern conservation movement might not exist at all. A cursory glance at the list of American national parks confirms that dramatic scenery, places in which the land easily fits into American aesthetic tastes, can aid – though not guarantee – success in conservation efforts. We seem to have an almost knee-jerk repulsion toward the rotting, the deathly, the sterile and artificial that confirms Pynchon's division of the Nietzschean artistic impulses between what is natural and what is artificial: that which is natural, which seems organic, is more aesthetically pleasing, whereas the mass-produced artifacts of the System repel us.

The second answer comes from the ways in which our authors have put Nietzsche's thought to use and is, I think, the more important. Despite the importance of aesthetic arguments to conservation, we're more concerned here with humor, play, the ludic side of nature and the ludic portrayal of nature in literature. The ways in which Nabokov and Pynchon play with the Nietzschean

idea of the Dionysian, with the affirmation of the world, the justification of the world through aesthetics, shows us that we can value nature not only because it is beautiful, but because it is the source of all beauty, of play, of those things that make life fun, enjoyable, a good thing. I argue that this is also the more fruitful possibility for exploration: how have Nietzschean ideas about nature influenced our ideas of play? We have seen Pynchon turn the uncontrollable, silly chaos of the Dionysian oneness with nature into a critique of the postwar capitalist system; how could we politicize this play? Can we divest Pynchon's ideas of their fatality, their determinism and instead draw from Nietzsche's ideas an effective and forceful political playfulness?

If, as I suspect, Nietzsche's influence on authors' ideas of nature surpasses Pynchon and Nabokov, it behooves us as ecocritics to find the answers to these questions. Perhaps we could find how tragedy and comedy intertwine in our absurd age, or simply understand how these authors, living in the midst of an unfolding catastrophe, find a way to laugh. We ecocritics are uniquely positioned to make these inquiries. We owe it to the biosphere under attack, to the human and animal masses cowering before Gradus, to lead the charge, kazoo at the ready.

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