

**THE APOCALYPSE ARCHIVE: AMERICAN LITERATURE AND THE NUCLEAR
BOMB**

by

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This dissertation looks at global nuclear war as a trope that can be traced throughout twentieth century American literature. I argue that despite the non-event of nuclear exchange during the Cold War, the nuclear referent continues to shape American literary expression. Since the early 1990s the nuclear referent has dispersed into a multiplicity of disaster scenarios, producing a “second nuclear age.” If the atomic bomb once introduced the hypothesis “of a total and remainderless destruction of the archive,” today literature’s staged anticipation of catastrophe has become inseparable from the realities of global risk. Consequently, to understand the relationship between the archive of twentieth and twenty-first century disaster literature and the world risk society, my dissertation revitalizes nuclear criticism by emphasizing the link between the development of nuclear weaponry and communication technologies.

I read a group of writers for whom nuclear war functions more as a structural principle than as a narrative event. William Carlos Williams’s *Spring and All* (1923) is a significant precursor of a nuclear imagination distinct from a more general apocalyptic imagination. By imagining the destruction and reappearance of terrestrial life, Williams’s poem captures the recursive character of the nuclear imagination. I then address the relationship between the nuclear imagination, narrative, and the writing of history in the novels of Thomas Pynchon, and

how his asymptotic engagement with nuclear war attempts to transform postmodernity's sense of an ending. David Foster Wallace's subsequent response in *Infinite Jest* (1996) to US metafiction's apocalyptic atmosphere is transitional between the first and second nuclear ages, reconfiguring the archive from a target of destruction into a system capable of producing emergent disaster through accumulation. My dissertation thus draws together technologies of destruction and preservation, and shows them to be inseparable in twentieth and twenty-first century US literature.

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1.0 MUTUALLY ASSURED DECONSTRUCTION: NUCLEAR CRITICISM AND AMERICAN APOCALYPTICS

“I like to read about mass destruction and suffering. I spend a lot of time reading stuff that concerns thermonuclear war and things that pertain to it. Horrible diseases, fires raging in the inner cities, crop failures, genetic chaos, temperatures soaring and dropping, panic, looting, suicides, scorched bodies, arms torn off, millions of dead. That kind of thing.”

—Don DeLillo, *End Zone*¹

The fact that the September 11 attacks were the stuff of popular fantasies long before they actually took place provides yet another case of the twisted logic of dreams: it is easy to account for the fact that poor people around the world dream about becoming Americans—so what do the well-to-do Americans, immobilized in their well-being, dream about? About a global catastrophe that would shatter their lives—why?

—Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!*²

Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. We can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world.

—Fredric Jameson, “Future City”³

1.1 INTRODUCTION: STAGING THE REALITY OF CONTEMPORARY GLOBAL RISK

This dissertation is the result of a fascination and an anxiety: a fascination with eschatological images and discourse, with narratives of disaster, ruin, and crisis; and an anxiety—or perhaps more accurately, a palpable if inchoate sense of embarrassment—*about* this fascination, about the fact that, like the protagonist of Don DeLillo’s *End Zone* (1972), “I like to read about mass destruction and suffering.” *Why?*

If the events of the last decade or so are any indication, I am surely not alone in my fascination(s) (nor, I imagine, in my anxieties). One would have to be either heroically impervious to global realities or else some extraterrestrial from a cosmically distant utopia to not in some way be captured by or implicated in this or that contemporary invocation, formulation, or instantiation of “crisis.” From the proliferation of increasingly realistic spectacles of destruction in cinema and other media, to the irrefutably disastrous effects of observable climate change, the multiplying projections of global risk, the clamoring barrage of news describing yet another instance of human violence, the follies of United States foreign policy, the rapacious effects of a global capitalism that seems to be less and less the result of human agency, and more and more like the emergent manifestations of some nonhuman entity over which we have little control, etc., etc.—if, as some have noted, information is the very air we breathe in the digital age, disaster is the cosmic background radiation, invisibly infiltrating every fiber of our being. As Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek has recently put it after the 2008 financial crisis: “If this sounds apocalyptic, one can only retort that we live in apocalyptic times.”⁴

But is this apocalyptic invocation not a bit much? Is not such talk hyperbolic in a fashion similar to how a particularly heavy winter storm now gets quickly labeled “snowmageddon” or “snowpocalypse” by reactionary and fear-mongering news networks bent upon increasing their ratings?⁵ Have we not left behind the grand narratives of the Cold War, specifically the apocalyptic fantasy of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD)? Have not the hands of the doomsday clock moved a little further away from midnight, even in light of such disturbing recent developments as North Korea’s third nuclear test since 2006 or the meteor strike over Chelyabinsk, Russia?⁶ Even with the increasing awareness of such portentous events granted by today’s global communication networks, is it not in some way anachronistic to continue projecting such global doom? Should not fascination with and anxiety about massive destruction belong to a previous age, an age often defined by the possibility of an immediate nuclear eschaton, rather than the today’s slow burn of ecological crisis? These and many others are precisely the questions, asked in light of the persistence of eschatological and thanoptic fantasies of all kinds, which motivate what follows.

If this dissertation emerges from a fascination with and an anxiety about discursive formulations and textual instantiations of disaster, and specifically projections of *nuclear* disaster, it is simultaneously grounded in an acknowledgment of the *power* of such discourses and texts to shape reality (and of course vice versa). Indeed, as I hope to develop in this chapter and throughout this dissertation, drawing a clear line of separation between “discourse” or “text,” on the one hand, and “reality,” on the other, seems to me, at least at this late and exhausted date, largely beside the point. Despite the constellation of poets, novelists, critics, theorists, and philosophers I draw upon,⁷ and how a number of these writers predominantly worked during a period of postmodernity that was very concerned with the relationship between signs and what, if

anything, they signified (to absurdly oversimplify the issue), my project of revisiting and revivifying the practice of *nuclear criticism* does not seek to rehearse or revisit the kinds of debates that caused so much bad blood and ink to be spilled between poststructuralism and its diverse opponents regarding the textuality of the text, the discursive construction of reality, or the virtuality of the real, etc.

Granted, our present moment may be lacking in the kind of rhetorical provocations that marked the most extreme salvos in these debates. Jean Baudrillard's infamous claim that provides the title for his essay, "The Gulf War Did Not Take Place" (1991),⁸ for example, would (perhaps) necessitate such equivalent responses as Christopher Norris's if it were made today: "[t]hat this is all sheer nonsense—a postmodern update on well-worn sophisticated themes—should be obvious to anyone not wholly given over to the vagaries of current intellectual fashion."⁹ But the ubiquity and proliferation of screens (all types of screens) at the present time—a moment that art historian and critic Terry Smith has productively called "contemporaneity"¹⁰—is making Baudrillard begin to appear not wrong or incendiary or naïve, as he once did for many, but quaint and perhaps even a bit precious.¹¹ No longer does it seem novel or radical to stress the simulated virtuality of contemporary life. Rather, such descriptions seem to be merely accurate.

This is not, however, to suggest that we are now living in some *Matrix*-like simulation,¹² nor am I proffering some uncomplicated misreading of Jacques Derrida's famous quip about there being nothing outside of the text.¹³ Rather, one of the big claims I want to make is about precisely the relationship between disaster and the real. Following the thinking of German sociologist Ulrich Beck and drawing upon his concept of the "world risk society," in contemporaneity the complexity of global risk is in many ways a result of how we imagined risk during the first nuclear age.¹⁴ The risks we now face often emerge from or occur because of

networks built, so the story goes, to *combat* risk, to preserve communication in the case of thermonuclear war.¹⁵ And today these networks have transformed into what is increasingly looking like a nonhuman entity or force, or if nothing else, an *emergent* phenomena. If we are to understand Beck's term "reflexivity of uncertainty"¹⁶ (and his related notion of "reflexive modernity"), this latter point makes it clear the kinds of reflexivity produced by risk projection. Risk, like irony, is reflexive and soon reaches what Paul de Man once called "the dimensions of the absolute."¹⁷ In the case of the projection of thermonuclear war, risk is also recursive. Imagining a nuclear eschaton, I think no one would disagree, played a significant role in *preventing* it from happening. And the *non-event* has produced, in the second nuclear age, a quite different set of risks, many of which continue to be inflected by the nuclear. The textual and aesthetic reflexivity and recursivity that so many have defined as aspects of postmodernism, something that David Foster Wallace dwelled on at length in his essay, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" (1993), cannot be divorced from the reflexivity of risk.

In this and other ways, Beck's thinking bears considerably upon my reading of William Carlos Williams's *Spring and All* (1923), and the work of Thomas Pynchon and Wallace. For Beck: "*The distinction between risk and cultural perception of risk is becoming blurred [. . .] the staged anticipation of disasters and catastrophes obliges us to take preventive action.*"¹⁸ Revising and expanding his earlier definition of risk society in his recent work *World at Risk* (2009), he further argues that

global risk is the *staging of the reality* [*Realitätsinszenierung*] of global risk. [. . .]

'Staging here is not intended in the colloquial sense of the deliberate falsification of reality by exaggerating "unreal" risks. The distinction between risk as anticipated catastrophe and the actual catastrophe forces us instead to take the role of staging

seriously. For only by imagining and staging world risk does the future catastrophe become present—often with the goal of averting it by influencing present decisions. Then the diagnosis of risk would be “a self-refuting prophecy”—a prime example being the debate on climate change which is supposed to prevent change.¹⁹

The implications of Beck’s notions for reading literature, particularly contemporary literature, have begun to be pursued in a number of productive and interesting ways.²⁰ But I think the implications of Beck’s thinking reveal, at a very fundamental level, one of the real and important *ethical* roles that literature does in fact play at the present time. Namely, how we imagine the world to be, and even more importantly, how we want the world *not* to be *matters*. Our ability to tell stories, and particularly our ability to tell stories about *risk*, stories that often prevent catastrophes, means that “*Believed anticipation of catastrophe is transforming the concept of society in the twenty-first century.*”²¹ And if the way we anticipate catastrophe is by telling stories, understanding those stories is of the utmost importance in the twenty-first century.

Certain stories about risk do in fact end. Often staged risks end in *catastrophe*, a term Beck distinguishes from risk.²² But other endings are (thankfully) less definite, and thus less clear. The projection of MAD, the primary way that the US State Department and US citizens staged the reality of global risk during the Cold War, has clearly transformed beyond recognition in the last two decades. But its legacies remain in a variety of ways. As Donald E. Pease argues so forcefully in *The New American Exceptionalism* (2009), the staging of the reality of global thermonuclear annihilation supported a state fantasy. “The fantasy that permitted U.S. citizens to achieve their national identity through the disavowal of U.S. imperialism was American exceptionalism.”²³ Consequently, the ideological and political stakes of staging global risk involve more than simply some bureaucratic, technocratic dream (or nightmare) of “managing”

risk (though obviously risk assessment and disaster management are visibly “booming” sectors of the US economy²⁴). This dissertation begins from the understanding that the history of risk projection in the US has fundamentally shaped the ideological and political terrain of the postwar era through the discourse of American exceptionalism, and that the US national fantasy of global catastrophe continues to find diverse kinds of expression today. As Pease argues about American exceptionalism and the national fantasy of MAD:

American exceptionalism was imagined as the primary means of warding off not merely an enemy ideology but a scene of catastrophic violence that could include the entire planet within its sphere of destruction. Defined as heresy none of whose tenets could become representable within the categorizations of the enemy’s symbolic order, American exceptionalism positioned U.S. citizens who took up this fantasy within the fantasmatic space of catastrophic destruction. When they hallucinated themselves as positioned there, this sublime fantasy enabled U.S. citizens to enjoy the attainment of their exceptional American identity through this awe-inspiring image of its possible total loss.²⁵

With the Cold War this national fantasy ended. As Pease goes on to demonstrate in his work, the nuclear de-escalation that followed the Cold War has transformed US national fantasy in a number of ways. The fantasmatic projection of nuclear devastation *did not occur*. Today, then, it is this non-event that has transformed the stories we tell about risk, and these stories are producing new national fantasies and new global risks.

This dissertation is an attempt, however, to tell a different kind of story, *about* different kinds of stories. I have largely eschewed looking at texts that represent nuclear disaster explicitly (perhaps as a way of distancing myself from both fascination *and* anxiety). Rather, it is the non-

event of nuclear war that largely interests me here, and particularly how eschatological fantasy and the nuclear imagination transform from the first to the second nuclear ages. The texts I discuss are not “apocalyptic” in the way a plethora of postwar American texts have been; I (mostly) do not discuss texts in which nuclear warfare is (clearly) represented, nor do I discuss texts that unambiguously present “realistic” disasters. Instead, I concern myself primarily here with more “experimental” texts—poems, novels, novellas, and short stories—that, though clearly emerging from what I call a nuclear imagination, attempt in many ways to subvert or transform the projection of MAD and its totalizing effects. If, as Pease argues, MAD is a fantasy, then the projections of nuclear destruction and post-apocalyptic survival tales that appeared during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries serve to both affirm and deny the historical realities of nuclear warfare and the US bombing of Hiroshima at the conclusion to the Second World War in insidious ways. Regarding MAD and Hiroshima, Pease writes:

the nuclear anxiety originating from Hiroshima was to be understood as if retrospectively crucial to the dismantling of the cold war mentality it had engendered. As the actual historical enactment of the “spectacular annihilation,” the cold war at once affirmed yet denied, Hiroshima acquired the U.S. public’s spontaneous consent for the containment ideology of the cold war epoch and a vivid justification for the policy of nuclear deterrence. As a historic national spectacle, Hiroshima turned the entire U.S. social symbolic system into the afterimage of a collectively anticipated primal scene, a self-divided (rather than self-present) instant, that always had not yet taken place (hence always anticipated) but had nevertheless always already happened (in the lived experience of anticipated disaster).²⁶

The group of writers I have gathered together here—William Carlos Williams, Thomas Pynchon, David Foster Wallace, and others—attempt to *resist* eschatological fantasy in different ways, and thereby problematize the relationship between Hiroshima, the present, and the future. Each, in his own particular manner, is aware of how projecting global nuclear annihilation serves to both affirm and deny the past, to both prop up dominant ideologies, and obscure the political realities of the present. Consequently, this dissertation attempts not only to describe different kinds of histories in order to inform our present formulations of global risk, it also reemphasizes the vital role that the literary imagination can play in understanding contemporaneity (despite claims to the contrary). In order to map this nuclear present, to describe a modernist pre-World War II nuclear imagination, and to describe the important transformations in the literary and nuclear imaginations between what I will persist in calling the first and second nuclear ages, I have returned to the project of nuclear criticism, particularly Jacques Derrida’s seminal essay, “No Apocalypse, Not Now: Full Speed Ahead (Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)” (1984), in order to introduce what I think is a vitally important term in the continuing discussion and development of the nuclear imagination, risk projection, national fantasy, and the serious reconsiderations of nuclear criticism occurring right now after a long period of dormancy. That term is *archive*. As I demonstrate through my reading of Pynchon and Wallace, it has now become impossible, if it in fact ever was, to separate *information technology* from nuclear technology, both in the imaginary and in reality. As Derrida so notoriously theorized that what nuclear war threatened was the archive, beyond anything else, today the archive has *itself* become a threat. What I call the *hyperarchival* impulse of contemporaneity, the urge to archivally preserve everything, regardless of content, and the tendency for information to accumulate without clearly defined goals and purposes grounding that accumulation²⁷—the

hyperarchival impulse is both on display in Pynchon and Wallace, and is simultaneously being heavily critiqued and problematized in each writer's work.²⁸ If today many are seeking terms to locate what is "beyond" postmodernism, what might constitute the "new," we should be wary of how closely such projects can be implicated in the hyperarchival urge of the present. If during the first nuclear age the archive was fantasized as a site of destruction, during the second nuclear age its limitless accumulation now defines a different, though quite similar horizon of eschatological fantasy and global risk. By returning to the important question of the nuclear as it transforms in the second nuclear age, my reading of Pynchon and Wallace will demonstrate some of the important pathways for understanding global risk in the digital age that we would do well to understand as one of the enduring legacies of experimental postmodern American literature.

1.2 "THE TWISTED LOGIC OF DREAMS": THE HYPERREAL, THE REAL, AND

9.11.01

That the fatal fragmentation of society might some day end is, for the cultural critic, a fatal destiny. He would rather that everything end than that mankind put an end to reification.

—Theodor W. Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society"²⁹

It is probably unavoidable to begin talking about fantasy and disaster, risk and projection, catastrophe and narrative at this point in time, especially framed by the terms of American exceptionalism, without talking about the events of 11 September 2001. But I hesitate to do so

for two reasons. First, it disturbingly seems both cliché and self-serving in ways that make me uncomfortable. Just as apocalyptic prophecy has been used in the service of hegemonic power for thousands of years, the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center (WTC) that largely inaugurated my adulthood have been used to justify an uncountable number of atrocious activities, both at the level of the state and at the level of the individual. So I worry that any discussion of 9.11.01 will implicate my intervention in similar ways.³⁰ Second, as many would largely agree, US literary production explicitly engaged with 9.11.01 has been sorely wanting.³¹ Novels like Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2006), and Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (2010) (to name only a few), with their emphasis on domesticity and the individual, their clear participation in an Amerocentrism, and their view on history and the present that largely ignores the conditions of *global* capitalism in the twenty-first century—make the American literary response to 9.11.01 seem both myopic and unimaginative. Though obviously there are valuable aspects to each of these novels, as well as other important moments in the growing corpus of US 9.11.01 literature—something like Amy Waldman's *The Submission* (2011), though wanting in other ways, seems like an important reframing of the event(s)—it will probably take the passage of a more significant amount of time before the historicity of 9.11.01 can be channeled productively in US literature.³²

Despite my hesitation, however, it would seem shortsighted not to immediately address an event that has been a kind of “testing ground” for postmodern theories of the image that dominated so much of the critical and theoretical discussion during the 1980s and 1990s, and for thinking about the contemporary spectacle of disaster. So rather than discuss the events or their literary response, and as a way of framing what is at stake in my nuclear critical approach, I will turn toward Slavoj Žižek and Jean Baudrillard's response to 9.11.01. I also turn toward these

thinkers as it provides me with a way of talking about American apocalypticism in more historical terms, and it introduces the need to talk about narrative eschatology more generally. If the reimagining of nuclear criticism is to be productive, Žižek and Baudrillard are excellent “testing grounds” of my own, particularly with regard to the primary debates surrounding nuclear criticism, which I will address at further length in the [third](#) and [fourth sections of this chapter](#). If the *fantasy* of annihilation has shaped so much of the nuclear imagination, then Žižek and Baudrillard offer poignant moments to press *against* that will inform my understanding of the nuclear imagination and my reading of the nuclear referent throughout the dissertation.

On the one year anniversary of the attacks on the WTC, notable radical publishing house Verso published three books.³³ Slim rectangles clearly meant to resemble the austere towers of the WTC, each book contains portions of the same image on its cover: a highly stylized, heavily processed photograph of people running from the collapsing towers. The cover of each book successively “zooms in” on the amorphous mass of smoke where the towers used to be, so that, through successively looking at all three, by the time one comes to the “close-up” of the gap created by the towers’ destruction, it is difficult to discern what we are seeing from a piece of abstract expressionism.³⁴ These books—penned by some of the most visible and controversial intellectuals of the late-twentieth century: Paul Virilio, Baudrillard, and Žižek—considered initially as aesthetic objects, participate in the very spectacle of disaster that they critically theorize between their covers. The shape of the books and the images portrayed on their covers unabashedly inscribe these objects as already collapsing, as already involved in the process of their own destruction and the repetition, in finer and finer granularity, of the attacks. Their “writing of the disaster”³⁵ houses that disaster in a structure that simultaneously reproduces that

disaster while announcing its anniversary. That this takes place from a position on the left should not distract us from the fragility of the towers being reproduced with the fragile word, with writing. And the fact that there are *three* of these books rather than two reveals a need for archival accumulation, a logorrhea that, faced with disaster, must keep writing in *excess* of the disaster itself.

Žižek makes much the same point in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!* (2002): “Of course, the point is not to play a pseudo-postmodern game of reducing the WTC collapse to just another media spectacle, reading it as a catastrophe version of the snuff-porno movies; the question we should have asked ourselves as we stared at the TV screens on September 11 is simply: *Where have we already seen the same thing over and over again?*”³⁶ His purpose in asking this question is to highlight a common response to the attacks: “it looked like a movie.” Such images of destruction had already become so visible, so common, that for Žižek 9.11.01 was merely the irruption into reality of the virtual regime of catastrophic images. To repeat the epigraph to this chapter from above: “The fact that the September 11 attacks were the stuff of popular fantasies long before they actually took place provides yet another case of the twisted logic of dreams: it is easy to account for the fact that poor people around the world dream about becoming Americans—so what do well-to-do Americans, immobilized in their well-being, dream about? About a global catastrophe that would shatter their lives—why?” In his patented Lacanian psychoanalytic mode, the images which repeated again and again, on that morning and since, were simply the realization of a supposed cultural-wide fantasy of desiring this type of spectacular disaster. It was already contained in writing itself, and its fulfillment in reality was merely a by-product of this imaginative regime. Curiously, disaster here cannot help but produce

excess in Žižek's own prose. In attempting to analyze the disaster, he inevitably participates in the very writing of the disaster he is analyzing.

Jean Baudrillard also cannot help participating in this operation in *The Spirit of Terrorism* (2002) as he develops his thinking along similar, if slightly different lines: "The fact that we have dreamt of this event, that everyone without exception has dreamt of it—because no one can avoid dreaming of the destruction of any power that has become hegemonic to this degree—is unacceptable to the Western moral conscience. Yet it is a fact, and one which can indeed be measured by the emotive violence of all that has been said and written in the effort to dispel it."³⁷ Clearly Baudrillard is rhetorically over-generalizing here, for surely the destruction of the WTC was not the destruction of Western hegemonic power, nor could one say that "everyone" surely dreamed of this event. The gusto and flourish of his prose, however, clearly indicates that, for him, the writing of the disaster, the writing produced in the face of disaster, is an attempt to destroy the fact that the disaster itself was already written, that it was the towers' "symbolic collapse that brought about their physical collapse, not the other way around."³⁸ And in his provocative style, he even goes so far as to imagine that "we might even be said to have before us the absolute event, the 'mother' of all events, the pure event uniting within itself all the events that have never taken place."³⁹

Žižek and Baudrillard's characteristically provocative rhetoric (and to a much lesser extent Virilio's) is essentially *apocalyptic*, a discourse of revelation and veils being ripped asunder. This discourse, however, has been effectively reversed if not qualitatively changed from traditional apocalyptic utterances. Rather than some veil of *māyā* covering over "real" reality—"truth" being that which the Apocalypse penetrates or unveils—what we have is an event which reveals *the virtuality that reality itself covers over*.⁴⁰ What is notable about this discourse,

however, is not simply how it mirrors the reversals both authors are so well-known for and which they employ so effectively,⁴¹ but also how it at first appears to reassess the age-old problem of eschatological imagination and prophecy.

Traditionally, the failure of the apocalyptic moment to occur, that it was “soon but not yet,” has assured the slow but steady primacy of something like the “reality-principle” with regard to apocalyptic discourse. One could imagine, predict, and prophesy the end to one’s heart’s content, at bottom assured that it would not occur. Consequently, eschatological formulations have often been effectively read with regard to their real consequences, referents, and goals. John of Patmos’s Apocalypse can and should be read as a political tract denouncing the Roman Empire. Norman Cohn has emphasized the anarchic and politically revolutionary aspects of medieval apocalypticism.⁴² And even something as benign as Alan Weisman’s recent *The World Without Us* (2007) only imagines the disappearance of humanity to emphasize the complex relationship humans have with their physical environment—i.e. that we are not *only* destroying the Earth; vast parts of its eco-system depend upon our presence. (And indeed, if we were to disappear the planet would ultimately be “fine,” with the exception of a thin layer of plastic in the geologic record.⁴³)

In the American tradition, the relationship between real-world rhetorical goals and the apocalyptic imagination finds its most clear articulation in what Sacvan Bercovitch, drawing upon Perry Miller, has designated the “American jeremiad.”⁴⁴ For Bercovitch, the Puritan “errand into the wilderness” required an accompanying rhetoric of producing perpetual crisis. (Today we can see such rhetoric in the economics of Milton Friedman.) To unite the disparate peoples of New England, the jeremiad served to define a community and to provide an eschatological destiny for the individuals of that community. Faced with the fires of damnation

and the soon-at-hand Last Judgment (a judgment all the more assured because these jeremiads were based on the perceived election or chosen nature of the people they were addressed to), the “*new chosen people, city on a hill, promised land, destined progress, New Eden, American Jerusalem,*”⁴⁵ etc.—these things could only be realized within the purview of an eschatological destiny, a destiny which required a rhetoric of eternal doom in order to facilitate a fantasy about a communal future.

The American Puritan [. . .] entails a ritual that obviates the traditional distinctions between preparation for salvation and social conformity—a carefully regulated process in which the fear for one’s soul is a function of historical process, moral discipline a means simultaneously to personal and social success, and success a matter of constant anxiety about the venture into the future [. . .] and it implies a form of community without geographical boundaries, since the *wilderness* is by definition unbounded, the *terra profana* ‘out there’ yet to be conquered, step by inevitable step, by the advancing armies of Christ.⁴⁶

The efficacy of the American jeremiad can be seen in the way it eventually secularized this type of rhetoric in and around the American Revolution, how

in virtually every area of life, the jeremiad became the official ritual form of continuing revolution. Mediating between religion and ideology, the jeremiad gave contract the sanctity of covenant, free enterprise the halo of grace, progress the assurance of the chiliad, and nationalism the grandeur of typology. In short, it wed self-interest to social perfection, and conferred on both the unique blessings of American destiny.⁴⁷

For Bercovitch, apocalyptic rhetoric, unconsciously or not, can be most clearly understood in the reality-effects it produced. The “event,” instantiation, or actual occurrence of the disaster, of the

apocalyptic moment, has little-to-no bearing on its reality. The imminence of such an event supplies all its rhetorical weight. That it is “soon but not yet” produces a reality of perpetual crisis and anxiety never to be eschatologically consummated.

Consequently, we can find in traditional apocalyptic discourse and representation, in which the jeremiad clearly falls, a perpetual *caesura* between the virtual and the real; in fact, the very structure of the apocalyptic imagination depends upon its never-being-realized. The apocalypse provides teleological thrust, eschatological meaning, and communal destiny for a world caught in what literary critic Frank Kermode, drawing upon Sir Philip Sidney’s *Apology for Poetry* (1595), would locate as the “middest.”⁴⁸ This structure is paramount to the apocalyptic imagination, for its actual realization would truly be a revelation, it would shatter the illusion of reality—whether produced by this imagination or not—and reveal the “truth.”

The significance of Baudrillard and Žižek’s reversal of traditional apocalyptic structures in their 9.11.01 books, however, is in danger of being overstated here. For Baudrillard in particular, the attack on the WTC actually constitutes an apocalyptic-type *event*, “the absolute event, the ‘mother’ of all events, the pure event uniting within itself all the events that have never taken place.” The horizon of this reversal is that it is the actual occurrence of the event which reveals the reality of the virtual, rather than the event revealing the virtuality of reality. But it is only this *actual occurrence of the event* that permits this reversal. It is not clear if this actually constitutes a significant departure, a difference in kind rather than simply degree, from traditional apocalyptic discourse:

In contrast to the nineteenth century of utopian or ‘scientific’ projects and ideals, plans for the future, the twentieth century aimed at delivering the thing itself—at directly realizing the longed-for New Order. The ultimate and defining moment of the twentieth

century was the direct experience of the Real as opposed to everyday social reality—the Real in its extreme violence as the price to be paid for peeling off the deceptive layers of reality.⁴⁹

For Žižek here as elsewhere, the Real is that horrible void that must be and is covered over by “reality,” by our construction of reality. To experience the Real is traumatic. What is revealed is not “truth” or reality as such, then, but the fictional nature of our experience. This “fiction” does not mask some more “real” reality, but rather is produced by the very lack of any transcendent truth or meaning. The “truth” is that there is no truth, only the nothing. The fictions we construct about the world are produced from an inability to confront the void.

In recent years, Žižek’s apocalypticism has become more pronounced. In both *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (2009) and *Living in the End Times* (2010), he has undergone what I would call an “apocalyptic turn.” This turn is recognizable in Žižek’s representation and discussion of disaster. In the intervening years between his thinking in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!*, which was largely grounded by what Alain Badiou calls the twentieth century’s “passion for the real,”⁵⁰ and 2008, Žižek’s despair about our inability to imagine the end of capitalism has introduced a thoroughgoing apocalypticism into his thinking, a sense of disaster that also desperately imagines and accepts as inevitable “a global catastrophe that would shatter [our] lives.”

His solution has been a simple and attractive. In nearly every one of his books since *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* (2004) he concludes by invoking a “Bartlebian politics.” From a Bartlebian stance, he thinks that for the intellectual (and others) the only proper political act available within the culture of late capitalism is the stance of Herman Melville’s *Bartleby*.⁵¹ Largely following a passage of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire* (2000),⁵² he argues that we should

approach the world uttering “I would prefer not to. . . .”⁵³ In his analysis of the failure to properly react to the financial crisis in *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, he writes: “Perhaps the solution resides in an eschatological apocalypticism which does *not* involve the fantasy of the symbolic Last Judgment in which all past accounts will be settled; . . . the task is ‘merely’ to stop the train of history which, left to its own course, leads to a precipice.”⁵⁴ And later: “We have to accept that, at the level of possibilities, our future is doomed, that the catastrophe will take place, that it is our destiny—and then, against the background of this acceptance, mobilize ourselves to perform the act which will change destiny itself and insert a new possibility into the past.”⁵⁵ This sentiment, that we need to assume the apocalypse (*without* revelation) is inevitable, that, in light of the realities of contemporary global capitalism, an apocalypse might indeed be *necessary*, has also recently been echoed by Evan Calder Williams: “What we need, then, is an apocalypse”⁵⁶ and then to restart “with a world after the fact of its collapse, an endless series of world collapses. . . . Constructing anew from leftovers”—an ethico-aesthetic mode he calls “salvage punk.”⁵⁷

Though I must admit that both Žižek and Williams’s invocation of a necessary apocalypse shares a rhetorical and affective resonance with my own thinking on the subject, and that I very much appreciate their often masterful critique of contemporaneity and its unique apocalyptic texts, in attempting to define a new relationship to history and capitalism, a mode of thinking capable of accounting for and confronting the increasingly complex realities of late capitalist existence, each thinker not only fails to acknowledge that his apocalyptic and messianic mode is thoroughly traditional (and somewhat antiquated)—along the lines of Norman Cohn’s analysis of Christian millenarianism in the Middle Ages—but makes the mistake of equating

ecological catastrophe, which has become one of the dominant projections of the apocalyptic imagination since the end of the Cold War, with the instantaneity of global nuclear war.

Recall the recent films of Roland Emmerich, perhaps especially *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and *2012* (2009). In each film Emmerich misconstrues current acknowledged realities about climate change, even the possibility of sudden climate change, with *instantaneous* climate change. Though narrativizing ecological disaster probably necessitates a more-or-less sudden environmental event or catastrophe to make proper narrative sense, to provide the moment of narrative crisis that Kermode, drawing upon Aristotle, calls *peripeteia*⁵⁸—something Kim Stanley Robinson explores in his *Science in the Capital Trilogy* (2004-2007) and *Red Mars Trilogy* (1993-1996)—Emmerich’s films are thoroughly structured by something that I will argue continues to be *nuclear*. Projecting an ecological disaster in the Anthropocene that instantaneously transforms and destroys human civilization is a narrative device that does not correspond to the realities of climate change, but shares a more clear genealogy with MAD. The national fantasy of instantaneous manmade destruction has not disappeared in Emmerich’s films. In something like *Independence Day* (1996) the fantasmatic national spectacle is on *display*. In other words, to imagine that an apocalypse is what the world “needs,” or that it is even *possible*, is a formulation still thoroughly grounded in a traditional apocalyptic imagination. That Emmerich is a German creating these eco-jeremiads is only a further testament to the transnational power of apocalyptic spectacle.

This is not to suggest that Žižek or Williams are participating in or reproducing an exceptional national narrative, indeed, they are doing quite the opposite, but they are very much delivering jeremiads. Perhaps in contemporaneity such jeremiads are exactly what we need to hear, and the successes (and failures) of revolutionary politics during the last decade does testify

to the power of the event. For each writer, however, the disaster is still very much *to come*.

Critics like James Berger in *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse* (1999), and Lee Quinby in *Anti-Apocalypse: Exercises in Genealogical Criticism* (1994) have provided some excellent readings of what might be called an anti-eschatological strain of American fiction.

Berger's reading of the twentieth century as defined by narratives of *post*-apocalypse and aftermath seem particularly important to keep in mind. As does Quinby's Foucauldian reading of how apocalyptic rhetoric can serve hegemonic power structures. But the persistence of eschatological *desire*, whether from the perspective of state fantasy or from the radical left, should give us pause.

Žižek and Baudrillard's books on 9.11.01 mark both a shift and a continuation of the persistence of apocalyptic formulations. This continuing persistence, if I may be so bold, can be located quite simply in the attempt to find a relationship between formulations of the apocalypse and reality as such. These attempts have a long history of failure and revision, but this in no way has lessened the persistence of presenting a relationship between the end and historical reality, for as Frank Kermode argues:

the great majority of interpretations of Apocalypse assume that the End is pretty near.

Consequently the historical reality is always having to be revised; time discredits it. And this is important. Apocalypse can be disconfirmed without being discredited. This is part of its extraordinary resilience. It can also absorb changing interests, rival apocalypses, such as the Sibylline writings. It is patient of change and of historiographical sophistications. It allows itself to be diffused, blended with other varieties of fiction [. . .] and yet it can survive in very naïve forms.⁵⁹

For Kermode, apocalyptic fictions, representations, and images do not depend upon any sort of real instantiation. They are too resilient, for no matter how much reality may frustrate the apocalyptic imagination, it is infinitely pliable and malleable with regard to reality—it does not depend upon reality as such for its realization.

And yet today it seems like it is reality itself that is pliable. Our sense of the real continues to be fundamentally shaped and transformed by apocalyptic fantasy, a fantasy that though it has lost the capacity for revelation, reflexively produces and responds to risk. The pliability of the apocalypse, of *narrative* to make sense out of all the incoherent and frustrating ways reality disconfirms beginnings and endings, has merged with Baudrillard's "hyperreal." Such a statement is not to suggest that the reality of disaster is textual or simulated. Quite the opposite. The epigraph from Fredric Jameson that begins this chapter, his revision of his famous statement that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, seems especially relevant here: "Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. We can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world." Today, in a world where the manufacturing of perpetual crisis serves the endless re-articulation of late capitalist modes and structures, it seems no longer possible or productive to continue the critique of the image vis-à-vis the disaster from the very position of (desiring) crisis, caesura, and peripeteia. Imagining the disaster produces more images, which produces more disaster, which produces more images, *ad infinitum*. Jameson's point, both originally and in his revision, is not, *contra* Žižek and Williams, that we need some "mother" of all events that would shatter the stranglehold of late multinational capitalism. Rather, it is a continuing call to imagine something different, to *not* imagine the end of the world, to not participate in the rhetoric and discourse of crisis as the only mode through to

some more humane way of living. If risk and catastrophe are fundamentally defined by how we *imagine* and project risk, then it no longer seems critically or theoretically productive to reproduce apocalyptic discourse so freely, so hyperbolically, so willingly. What we “need” is not some apocalypse. What we need is to imagine time and space, the conditions of the network society, and our relationship to the historical archive and the archive to come in different ways—to tell a *different* narrative. William Carlos Williams’s early experimental prose-poetry is a testament to this need. As is Thomas Pynchon’s massive work of historical fiction inflected by his resistance to what I call the optical society. And David Foster Wallace is explicit in his desire to move past the apocalypticism of postmodern American metafiction. The continuing power of these writers, whose influence does not seem to be waning,⁶⁰ for me is directly tied to their efforts to imagine different stories, to imagine *narrative itself*, differently. The necessity to heed this effort, the necessity to imagine a way of being in world that is *anti*-eschatological informs the work of this dissertation. And it is my contention that revisiting and revivifying the practice of nuclear criticism to confront the challenges of the control society provides one path toward no apocalypse, not *now*.

1.3 NUCLEAR ANACHRONISM(S) AFTER THE COLD WAR: THE LEGACIES OF DERRIDA’S “NO APOCALYPSE, NOT NOW”

Everything is being blown away;

A little horse trots up with a letter in its mouth, which is read with eagerness

As we gallop into the flame.

—John Ashbery, “A Last World”⁶¹

In the midst of the debt crisis that dominated the news cycle during the summer of 2011, Joseph Cirincione published a short piece in *The Atlantic*, “How to Shave a Bundle off the Deficit: Spend Less on Nukes.” In this (un)timely article, Cirincione points out that

the government is set to spend almost \$700 billion on nuclear weapons over the next 10 years, roughly as much as it spent on the war in Iraq over the [previous] decade. Most of the money will be spent without any clear guidance on how many weapons we need and for what purpose. Procurement is racing ahead of policy. . . . As *Forbes* recently noted, “Barack Obama is likely to spend more money on the U.S. nuclear arsenal than any U.S. president since Ronald Reagan.”⁶²

Current president of The Ploughshares Fund, a prominent anti-nuclear foundation, Cirincione suggests that the US desperately needs a “nuclear road map”—a strategy for contemporary nuclear realities rather than “weapons to fight last century’s conflict”⁶³—before spending *any* more money on nuclear technology. And it appears that Cirincione’s efforts have been effective in drawing legislative attention to this issue, as in October 2011 Cirincione reported in *The Atlantic* that Massachusetts Representative, Democrat Edward J. Markey, sent a letter to the budgetary Super Committee, signed by 65 members of Congress, calling for \$200 billion in cuts from the nuclear weapons budget over the next ten years.⁶⁴

As my purpose here is to seriously reconsider, in a contemporary context, what once went under the heading of nuclear criticism, it is significant to note that Markey’s letter begins by emphasizing that “the Berlin Wall fell. The Soviet Union crumbled. The Cold War ended. Yet 20 years later, we continue to spend over \$50 billion a year on the U.S. nuclear arsenal. This makes no sense [. . .]. We are robbing the future to pay for the unneeded weapons of the past.”⁶⁵ For

weapons that were only used aggressively when atomic technology was still new, the “unneeded weapons of the past” largely functioned during the twentieth century as an arsenal of futurity, as the “to come,” a speculative event that a great outpouring of military and cultural production attempted to imagine. But here Markey seems to indicate that nuclear weapons are as militarily archaic as, say, trench warfare. Somehow the nuclear capacity of the US itself has become a relic of the past. Consequently, the pervasive national fantasy of global catastrophe and MAD has somehow moved into a position of historicity, an event that, though it did not occur, has been transformed into a document in what might be called a nonexistent “apocalypse archive.” (That the US is set to spend the same amount on its nuclear arsenal that it spent in Iraq is a further testament to the untimely anachronistic realities of nuclear weapons.) In a similar fashion, one might be tempted to classify nuclear criticism—which was practiced between 1984 and 1993, and more-or-less vanished with the end of the Cold War—as similarly anachronistic and outdated, a mode of cultural engagement whose occasion has passed. Yet I would like to argue that precisely the opposite is the case at the moment; and it may very well be the “untimely” nature of nuclear criticism—in the sense that Nietzsche gives the word⁶⁶—that makes it appropriate to reconsider.

Jacques Derrida in the early 1980s delivered two papers on explicitly apocalyptic topics. The first, “On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy” (1984),⁶⁷ undertook to analyze philosophy in terms of apocalyptic discourse. The second, “No Apocalypse, Not Now: Full Speed Ahead (Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)” (1984),⁶⁸ outlined a multivalent, rigorous, and malleable nuclear criticism for literary studies. Indeed, depending upon how seriously we might take him, we might read these essays as Derrida proposing nothing less than an overhaul of the disciplinary boundaries of literature and philosophy themselves. Though his statements tend

toward the hyperbolic and ironic, as they associate all literature with the nuclear issue, their claims should be confronted today: “thus one cannot be satisfied with saying that, in order to be serious and interesting today, a literature and a literary criticism must refer to the nuclear issue, must even be obsessed by it. To be sure, this should be said, and it is true. But I believe that, at least indirectly, literature has always done this. *It has always belonged to the nuclear epoch*, even if it does not talk ‘seriously’ about it.”⁶⁹ For any reader of Derrida, the declarative tone of this statement cannot be ignored, especially for a writer whose style is so often characterized by its deferrals, ellipses, circles, half-statements, and contradictions. Furthermore, he even goes so far as to off-handedly remark near the end of “No Apocalypse” that, with regard to “the topic of this name, ‘nuclear criticism,’ one can predict that soon after this colloquium, programs and departments in universities may be created under this title, just as one did well, even with all the ambiguity it entailed, to create programs or departments of ‘women’s studies’ or ‘black studies’ and more recently of ‘peace studies.’”⁷⁰ Assuredly, no programs or departments of “nuclear criticism” have arisen, and even the term has fallen into almost complete disuse in the past fifteen years or so,⁷¹ but for a while in the waning days of the Cold War, some scholars were quite invested in pursuing a project of nuclear criticism.

In April of 1984, a colloquium on the topic of nuclear criticism was held at Cornell University. Major papers from this conference, including “No Apocalypse,” were then published that summer in a special edition of *Diacritics*.⁷² The editor of this issue of *Diacritics*, Richard Klein, defined nuclear criticism in his introduction: “by Nuclear Criticism is meant something positive and something unavowed, a new topic and an explication of what is already everywhere being done.”⁷³ Though this is a fantastically vague definition, and allowed the papers collected in *Diacritics* along with his own proposed subjects for investigation to define exactly what was

meant by nuclear criticism,⁷⁴ the initial gesture to propose the term arose because literary studies and literary theory in general had been too silent with regard to nuclear issues, a silence that could not continue because of the “important contribution” that literary and critical theory could make “to the public discussion of nuclear issues.”⁷⁵ Furthermore, the proposal for a nuclear criticism arose “out of reading a certain amount of recent criticism and critical theory and feeling that without exception it recounts an allegory of nuclear survival”; and that the one could show “how the terms of the current nuclear discussion are being shaped by literary or critical assumptions whose implications are often, perhaps systematically, ignored.”⁷⁶ In other words, literary theory was especially capable of dealing with nuclear issues, both in the public sphere and within the academy, and its general silence should be rectified. Though this issue of *Diacritics* included some significant contributions—among them Frances Ferguson’s “The Nuclear Sublime” on the unthinkable or unrepresentable nature of nuclear war, and Derrick De Kerckhove’s “On Nuclear Communication,” which tied the nuclear and the atomic firmly to the history of the phonetic alphabet—Derrida’s “No Apocalypse” has received the bulk of attention and controversy when it comes to the issue of nuclear criticism.

Much of this attention has focused on Derrida’s claim that literary theorists are especially competent to confront the nuclear issue because it is

fabulously textual, through and through. Nuclear weaponry depends, more than any weaponry in the past, it seems, upon structures of information and communication, of language, including unvocalizable language, of codes and graphic decoding. But the phenomenon is fabulously textual also to the extent that, for the moment, nuclear war has not taken place: one can only talk and write about it.⁷⁷

This claim, clear as it is (despite the “it seems”) angered some scholars, even some working within the field of nuclear criticism, because it appears to eschew absolutely any *reality* for nuclear war, that its possibility or probability, its actual instantiation in the world would be merely textual (or virtual). This reaction to Derrida has mostly been around his earlier, controversial claim that “there is nothing outside the text,” that even *a nuclear war* can only be confronted as a text, that it is not “real” in his thinking. Though he clarifies why this is, both above, and when he says “nuclear war has no precedent. It has never occurred, itself; it is a non-event,” that what permits such a statement, *for the moment*, is that nuclear war has not occurred, none of this has prevented people from denouncing Derrida’s nuclear criticism.

In the Winter 1990 issue of *Papers on Language & Literature*, the only other special issue of a journal wholly devoted to the issue of nuclear criticism, William J. Scheick writes in his editorial introduction to both the journal itself and the concept of nuclear criticism, that “nuclear criticism aims to transform the poststructuralist distant and abstract emphasis on the indeterminacy of the meaning of any thought or word to an immediate and relevant emphasis on the determinacy of *at least one meaning: the utter reality of predictable death*, of the total extinction of all life, in terms of the nuclear referent.”⁷⁸ For Scheick, drawing upon J. Fisher Solomon and others,⁷⁹ the *reality* of nuclear war can be located in the fact that it is logically predictable and probable.⁸⁰ Consequently, to confine thinking about nuclear war to the merely literary is irresponsible and wrong. For Scheick, nuclear criticism is primarily an *ethical* criticism, perhaps the *most* ethical criticism, as it revolves around “the one ultimate concern that has always mattered to humanity throughout history: the preservation of life.”⁸¹ Ethics for Scheick boils down to the preservation of the species, and the reality of the possibility of the species’ extinction becomes the reality of his ethical imperative. “The nuclear referent is the

'most real' of empirical potentialities; situationally verifiable, it 'really' threatens the extinction of life."⁸² The "goal" or task of nuclear criticism, the foundation of its ethical stance, is to prevent this reality, this "'most real' of empirical potentialities."⁸³ This is a very different nuclear criticism from the one outlined by Derrida, yet his text is still the foundation for this ethical nuclear criticism. Consequently, during the "heyday" of nuclear criticism, we can discern a clear split between an "ethical nuclear criticism" and a "deconstructive nuclear criticism."

When Scheick and Solomon insist on the *reality* of the nuclear, on a nuclear criticism whose horizon is the prevention of total nuclear war, and they thereby misread "No Apocalypse." Both read Derrida as if he is *denying* nuclear war's real possibility, that it would merely be a "text" to read. But I find that Derrida's text, his "denial" of the reality of nuclear war, comes from simply the position that it has not happened yet. For Solomon, the empirical reality of a nuclear war is based on its possibility, and, since it is possible, it is real. Derrida does not in any way deny that the actual, real, empirical instantiation of nuclear war is a possibility: "the nuclear age *gives us to think* this aporia of speed starting from the limit of absolute acceleration at which the temporalities called subjective and objective, phenomenological and intraworldly, authentic and inauthentic, and so on, would end up merging in the uniqueness of an ultimate event, of a final collision or collusion."⁸⁴ This ultimate event, this final collision, however, "is obviously the *possibility* of an irreversible destruction, leaving no traces, of the juridico-literary archive and therefore of the basis of literature and criticism. Not necessarily the destruction of humanity, of the human habitat, or even of other discourses (arts or sciences), or even indeed of poetry or the epic."⁸⁵ For Derrida, this destruction of the archive is a very real possibility, and it is *this* that nuclear war would bring about. One can imagine fragments of humanity going on after a nuclear war; oral-poetry, non-literary memory, the "real referent external to the archive itself" may

continue existing, but what would be destroyed in reality would be our textual, literary, and archival relationship to reality, to history. The reality that Scheick and Solomon want to prevent, the annihilation of humanity, is *this* annihilation, the *reality* of it. Both draw their lines at the possibility of this reality, but do not investigate what exactly this reality would be, and that is Derrida's point. No one is competent enough to understand this future possibility because it is so radical that it functions as wholly other. It is the special *incompetence* of literature and literary theory, its ability to *imagine*, "its facility with texts, all kinds of texts,"⁸⁶ which make this wholly other future reality and possibility the privileged domain of literature. Consequently, "Derrida's scare quotes around 'real' in 'direct and realistic description of a "real" nuclear catastrophe' mark the impossibility of ever attaining a direct, unmediated, nonrepresentational 'real' experience of nuclear war; a subject in that position would no longer be a subject."⁸⁷ For all of Scheick and Solomon's emphasis on the empirical reality of the possibility of nuclear war, they ignore the fact that, for Derrida, there can be no empirical *experience* of total nuclear war, *only its possibility*. Derrida's text, rather than trying to eschew or obfuscate the reality of the possibility of nuclear war, merely places literature in a privileged position to talk about it for, at the moment, that *is* its only reality: it only "exists" as discourse, its possibility, especially in Scheick and Solomon's thinking, can only be expressed discursively. (One may easily propose here the hypothesis that it is the very type of project that Scheick and Solomon are engaged in that "prove" Derrida right. To get at the empirical reality of nuclear war, *they must talk about it*. He is ultimately not saying anything more radical than this.⁸⁸)

To understand the full impact of Derrida's thinking, and to assess the large implications of his conceptions of literature with regard to the nuclear, it is necessary, having cleared away some of the prismatic controversies of post-Derridean nuclear criticism, to quote him at length;

and it is a passage I feel deserves such lengthy quotation. Furthermore, I feel that this section of “No Apocalypse, Not Now” deserves significantly more attention than it has heretofore received from nuclear criticism and literary studies:

The hypothesis we are considering here is that of a total and remainderless destruction of the archive. This destruction would take place for the first time, and it would lack any common proportion with, for example, the burning of a library, even that of Alexandria, which occasioned so many written accounts and nourished so many literatures. The hypothesis of this total destruction watches over deconstruction, it guides its footsteps, allowing one to recognize, in the light, so to speak, of that hypothesis or phantasm, the characteristic structures and historicity of the discourses, strategies, texts, or institutions to be deconstructed. This is why deconstruction, at least what is being advanced today under that name, belongs to the nuclear age. And to the age of literature. If “literature” is the name we give to the body of texts whose existence, possibility, and significance are the most radically threatened, for the first and last time, by the nuclear catastrophe, *this gives one to think the essence of literature*, its radical precariousness and the radical form of its historicity; but by the same token, through literature, what gives itself to thinking is the *totality* of that which, like literature and henceforth in it, is exposed to the same threat, constituted by the same structure of historical fictionality, producing and then harboring its own referent. We may thus assert that the historicity of literature is thoroughly contemporaneous with, or rather structurally indissociable from, something like the nuclear epoch (by nuclear “epoch,” I also mean something like the *epochē* suspending judgment before the absolute decision). The nuclear age is not an epoch, it is the absolute *epochē*; it is not absolute knowledge and the end of history, it is the epoch of

absolute knowledge. Literature belongs to this nuclear epoch, that of the crisis and of nuclear criticism, at least if we mean by this the historical and ahistorical horizon of an absolute self-destructibility without apocalypse, without revelation of its own truth, without absolute knowledge.

This statement is not abstract.⁸⁹

What I want to emphasize here, among many other things, is that this is indeed not an abstract statement; it is the specific *materiality* of literature, the very real and constant threat of the material disappearance, dissolution, and destruction of literature, of the *archive*, that bounds one end of Derrida's horizon. The other end of this horizon, however, is equally important: that literature itself as *material* contains within and *through* it the totality of this destruction; literature is everywhere engaged with thinking through its essence, it "gives itself to think" its own destruction, its writing of the disaster. These statements are not abstract nor are they merely dialectical word-games in which two opposite things are reversed and turned on their head until they become indistinguishable from one another. Rather, through emphasizing the very materiality of literature itself, Derrida has offered a model in which "all literature is apocalyptic" not merely tropologically, structurally, or archetypally, but *materially* first and foremost. To think through this materiality requires a dialectical vision of the archive's destruction, on the one hand, and the destruction always already contained in the archive on the other. What occurs through this radical materialism is nothing less than a mode of approaching literature in general, and apocalyptic literature specifically, that is not dependent upon the incommensurability between "reality" and the imagination. The very aporia I have concerned myself with here as a fundamental impasse to thinking through and about the apocalypse with regard to literature—the persistence of the apocalyptic imagination, the continual and eternal attempts to find a

relationship between the fantasmatic image and the reality of an event—can be effectively resolved here because both a “real” Apocalypse and an imagined one are subsumed into the category and material of literature itself. What has largely not been explored with regard to readings of “No Apocalypse, Not Now,” nuclear criticism, and apocalyptic studies in general is *this* implication: Derrida’s work here has the ability to reconfigure how one goes about thinking and writing about apocalyptic literature by effectively demonstrating that one need have no recourse to anything beyond its material instantiation and the mode it thinks through materiality for the stakes of its various projects to be given to thought, and it reconceives the important role the study of apocalyptic literature may serve beyond understanding representations of a collective thanatos.

Nuclear literature forces one to confront the very fragility of texts-themselves and makes possible the critical perspective that eschatological anxiety is fundamentally an anxiety regarding the (continued) existence of texts. The persistence of the apocalyptic imagination both in the past, present, and future, understood in relationship to the nuclear referent, hence becomes an index of how the imagination structures its inscription while being fully aware of the possible disappearance of that inscription. Simply put, what this allows for the critic is an ability to study texts, apocalyptic or otherwise, that finds a more fundamental anxiety over disaster in textual production itself than simply the apocalyptic nature of narrative. When Kermode and others categorize all literature as apocalyptic, they do so because it is the inevitable narrativity of books, that they begin and end, which is eschatological. This critical perspective, however, does not go far enough in that it glosses over the fundamental fact that the material instantiation of the book *itself* may very well have an end, that its status as object is not eternal and unchanging, but contingent and ephemeral. Any textual production then must be confronted with questions of

how it articulates this contingency, the *eschaton* it grounds itself upon; and understanding, even partially, how this occurs is tantamount to any reading practice whatsoever. At no point in the past, even with the burning of the Library of Alexandria, is it as clear what precisely is at stake in such a critical perspective, in that, for all the gestures digitization, the Internet, and current archival practices make toward something like “the infinite book” or the “total archive,” in all these textual practices decay, loss, dissolution, and disappearance operate fundamentally. This, of course, has been true since the appearance of the written word. What has been so curious about the near-total disappearance of nuclear criticism from scholarly discourse, until very recently, is that its practice is perhaps better suited now (than in the 1990s) to the problems facing a scholar working in the digital age, as it places critical questions of the very material which is the object of that scholarship first and foremost. In short, nuclear criticism offers the possibility of a mode of criticism capable of handling current and future textual practices upon a solid critical ground. The *abgrund* which has for so long been characteristic of all kinds of apocalypticism finds in nuclear criticism something substantial upon which to build.

Derrida’s nuclear criticism also has significant implications for many of the problems that have faced studies of apocalyptic literature in general in that it potentially redraws the very boundaries of what may be meant by “apocalyptic.” By locating literature *itself* as situated within a nuclear epoch, the old myth of apocalyptic revelation and eschatological truth, of a finally achieved total knowledge, can then be understood as revealing the other material horizon of the archive. The persistence of the deferral and re-articulation of *apocalypsis* or revelation, the fact that so many apocalyptic narratives are *post*-apocalyptic (in which no revelation has occurred), the fact that we experience the world from a position in the “middest,” and even the mode in which the archive is organizing itself in “reality,” all point to this other horizon, which Derrida

outlines in his short essay on Blanchot's take on Mallarmé's "*Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*" (1897), in "The Book to Come" (1959). If, on the one hand, the nuclear epoch makes us consider the "total and remainderless destruction of the archive," then, on the other hand there is also "a constant reinvestment in the book project, in the book of the world or the world book, in the absolute book (this is also why [. . .] the end of the book [i]s interminable or endless.)"⁹⁰ (Or in other words, if one fantasmatic limit of the archive may be figured in something like Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Earth's Holocaust" [1844], Jorge Luis Borges marks the other fantasmatic limit in "The Library of Babel" [1941] or "The Book of Sand" [1975].) The desire for this total book, this archive not as destroyed without remainder but rather as archive which grants revelation,

re-creates the temptation that is figured by the World Wide Web as the ubiquitous Book finally reconstituted, the book of God, the great book of Nature, or the World Book finally achieved in its onto-theological dream, even though what it does is to repeat the end of the book as to-come.

These are the two fantasmatic limits of the book to come, two extreme, final, eschatic figures of the end of the book, the end as death, or the end as *telos* or achievement. We must take seriously these two fantasies; what's more they are what makes [*sic*] writing and reading happen. They remain as irreducible as the two big ideas of the book, of the *book both as the unit of a material support in the world*, and as the unity of a work or unit of discourse (a book in the book). But we should also perhaps wake up to the necessity that goes along with these fantasies.⁹¹

Though Derrida wrote the above thirteen years after "No Apocalypse, Not Now," it should be clear that "The Book to Come" operates as a kind of companion piece that completes his theorization of the apocalyptic horizons of literature. Much of the confusion around the concept

of the Apocalypse, especially since the advent of the nuclear bomb, has resulted because the term “Apocalypse” has been blurred—i.e. is it destruction or revelation? What would a nuclear Apocalypse reveal, if anything? Consequently, if the nuclear epoch is the *epochē* of absolute knowledge, of the impossibility, despite the persistence of the fantasy, of an absolute, total archive, nuclear criticism and the study of apocalyptic literature must take into account that, not only does the fantasy of disaster, catastrophe, destruction, and dissolution ground the materiality of its endeavors, but so do excess, accumulation, and *hyperarchivization*; the very exponential increase of the archive, of modes of literature, of apocalyptic representations themselves are *just as much an aspect of the nuclear epoch* as are visions of destruction. This over-accumulation and will-toward-totality are the obverse parallax horizon of nuclear criticism, something that previous “nuclear criticisms” have not theorized.

During the second nuclear age pursuing nuclear criticism permits and provides, among *many* other things, a manner of dealing with apocalyptic literature (and literature in general) that not only potentially resolves the millennia-old aporia between reality and the apocalyptic imagination, but also provides a sturdy and robust *material* foundation from which to read all kinds of texts, apocalyptic or otherwise. Along these lines, much has been made of Derrida’s statement that “in truth I believe that the nuclear epoch is dealt with more ‘seriously’ in the writings of Mallarmé, of Kafka, or Joyce, for example, than in present-day novels that would describe a ‘true’ nuclear catastrophe directly and in a ‘realistic’ fashion.”⁹² Rather than reading this statement as an “apparent abyss between the ‘popular’ and the ‘serious,’”⁹³ as privileging Literature (with a capital L) to confront nuclear issues over what had up until that point appeared to be the privileged site of nuclear narratives—science or speculative Fiction (SF)—I would like to point out that the real effect of Derrida’s claim is to highlight texts that one would not think of

as belonging to the nuclear epoch *at all*, if for no other reason than none of these authors lived to see the explosion of an atomic bomb. In other words, we will *surely* have recourse to texts dealing explicitly with a nuclear catastrophe, they cannot be avoided nor should they be excluded as some have suggested Derrida is implying,⁹⁴ but also that, if we follow Derrida in asserting that all literature belongs to the nuclear epoch, many things that might not readily suggest themselves because of their apparent distance will then resonate within a project of nuclear criticism.⁹⁵

This dissertation will pursue the resonances between the nuclear imagination, nuclear representation, optical physics, information technology, and different modes of emergence from the modern to the postmodern, and it will attempt to firmly ground itself in the materiality of literature as much as possible. To ground the history of what might be called the “long nuclear twentieth century,” I will now turn toward the nuclear imagination as it began to be articulated before the First World War.

1.4 NUCLEAR DYNAMOS: HENRY ADAMS AND H.G. WELLS

But bombs educate vigorously, and even wireless telegraphy or air-ships might require the reconstruction of society.

—Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*⁹⁶

If we are curious about Derrida’s invocation of Stéphane Mallarmé, Franz Kafka, and James Joyce as being potentially rich grounds to turn a project of nuclear criticism toward, it seems that the late writings of Henry Adams would also be quite appropriate to turn to in order to trace the development of the nuclear referent prior to the Second World War. *The Education of Henry*

Adams (1918) provides perhaps one the most prophetic, disturbing, and convincing accounts of how the massive technological changes that were taking place around the turn of the nineteenth century would transform the world. And it is difficult to read Adams's thinking toward the end of the volume without noting what in retrospect seems difficult to read as anything less than a kind of nuclear prescience, and as an awareness about the exponential rate of technological change that would quickly outpace human cognition and control.⁹⁷ For instance, consider the following:

So long as the rates of progress held good, these bombs would double in force and number every ten years. [. . .] The railways alone approached the carnage of war; automobiles and fire-arms ravaged society, until an earthquake became almost a nervous relaxation. An immense volume of force had detached itself from the unknown universe of energy, while still vaster reservoirs, supposed to be infinite, steadily revealed themselves, attracting mankind with more compulsive course than all the Pontic Seas or Gods or Gold that ever existed and feeling still less the retiring ebb.⁹⁸

Adams's awareness about the relationship between "progress" and the increasing capacity for violence made possible by the technological mastery of the world is an awareness that has haunted nearly every significant thinker during the twentieth century. We can read in Adams the seeds of Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). Heidegger's "The Question Concerning Technology" (1954) appears to necessarily follow from Adams thinking. And the entire *oeuvre* of Pynchon never escapes Adams's orbit, which I discuss at much further length in [Chapter 3](#).

Adams's biggest breakthrough was his exposure to the idea of "force," and how the dynamo—his famous symbol of modernity—harnesses that force. Samuel Pierpont Langley first

introduced Adams his concept of force at the 1900 Paris *Exhibition Universelle*. This caused Adams to realize, upon viewing one of the dynamos that had been set up for the exhibition that

X-rays had played no part whatever in man's consciousness, and the atom itself had figured only as a fiction of thought. In these seven years [between the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 and 1900] man has translated himself into a new universe which had no common scale of measurement with the old. He had entered a supersensual world, in which he could measure nothing except by chance collisions of movements imperceptible to his senses, perhaps imperceptible to his instruments, but perceptible to each other, and so to some known ray at the end of the scale. Langley seemed prepared for anything, even for an indeterminable number of universes interfused,—physics stark mad in metaphysics.⁹⁹

In 1945 that force exploded into the world and no longer did one need a symbol for it in the abstract dynamo, one need only open up the newspaper or, a few years later, take a trip to Las Vegas, where one could stand atop a hotel and watch bombs go off in the desert. And perhaps what is most striking about Adams is, that for all the destructive and chaotic creation stories, for all the apocalyptic prophecies which have dotted history's landscape, all the postlapsarian tales and portents of doom, no one has been more accurate about what will allow the end of the world to enter reality, to make it possible, to make it "human." *The Education of Henry Adams* may very well mark the *caesura* between an eschatology marked by faith and one defined along scientific lines. For Adams, the "dynamo became a symbol of infinity [. . .] a moral force, much as the early Christians felt the Cross."¹⁰⁰ The infinite, inexhaustible nature of this force, and the acceleration of humanity's ability to harness it, would mean that "*bombs would double in force and number every ten years.*"¹⁰¹ Consequently, science now flirted with the same apocalyptic

abyss in seeking to understand and harness infinite force as religion had done for millennia.¹⁰²

The dynamo had replaced the Cross as a symbol for the infinite and for the unrepresentable.

“The rays that Langley disowned as well as those which he fathered were occult, supersensual, irrational; they were a revelation of mysterious energy like that of the Cross; they were what, in terms of mediæval science, were called immediate modes of the divine substance.”¹⁰³ But the specific resistance of the nuclear referent to a narrative in which it merely replaces religious modes of understanding would appear to belie such an account of whatever it is about the nuclear that has restructured the world, spatially and temporally, in Adams’ words, “into a new universe.” And indeed, he himself would accede this, as the shift from the Cross to the dynamo as symbols of force in human life represents the shift from cultural unity to multiplicity. If the Apocalypse was previously understood in terms of the unity represented by the Cross, the new force of the dynamo (and consequently the nuclear bomb) would teach something quite different about the end of the world.

It is just such a vision of modernity, the lessons of being educated by the dynamo, and the needs to address the exponential rate of technological change that grounds the first text which dealt explicitly with global nuclear war: H.G. Wells’ incredibly prescient *A World Set Free* (1914).¹⁰⁴ In what is now clearly recognizable as a surprising description of the world after atomic war, Wells imagines a shattered world that would dominate the nuclear imagination of the twentieth century and beyond: “most of the capital cities were burning; millions of people had already perished, and over great areas government was at an end. Humanity had been compared by one contemporary writer to a sleeper who handles matches in his sleep and wakes to find himself in flames.”¹⁰⁵ Imagining atomic war for Wells, however, does not occasion him to give a completely bleak view of such an apocalyptic scenario, as he does with the entropic,

heat-death of the universe in *The Time Machine* (1895) or how Nevil Shute's later *On the Beach* (1957) imagined the result of a global nuclear war as the utter annihilation of humanity. Rather the aftermath of Wells's global nuclear conflagration is a utopian field of possibility. The major problem presented in the novel is not that atomic war destroys the world, but rather that the world was well on its way toward catastrophe without nuclear weapons: "civilization was very near disaster when the atomic bombs came banging into it, that if there had been no Holsten [the inventor of the bombs] and no induced radio-activity, the world would have—smashed—much as it did [. . .]. The whole system was rushing toward bankruptcy. And they were spending every year vaster and vaster amounts of power and energy upon military preparations, and continually expanding the debt of industry to capital."¹⁰⁶ The catastrophe of atomic war in Wells's novel causes humanity to reorganize itself along scientific lines into an "Empire of the World,"¹⁰⁷ which ushers in an unprecedented era of peace, prosperity, and human possibility (i.e., a "world set free" by atomic weapons). The main character of the last section of *A World Set Free*, Karenin (a clear allusion to Leo Tolstoy), nearing the end of his life, sums up the utopian nature of the world nearly one hundred years after the atomic war: "Life is beginning and nothing else but beginning. It begins everlastingly [. . .]. This Modern State of ours, which would have been a Utopian marvel a hundred years ago, is already the commonplace of life. But as I sit here and dream of the possibilities in the mind of man that now gather to a head beneath the shelter of its peace, these great mountains here seem but little things. . . ."¹⁰⁸ For Wells the catastrophe of atomic war apocalyptically and comedically ushers in, if not a religiously defined New Jerusalem, then a scientific utopia, one only made possible by confronting the most extreme horrors and possibilities of the emerging science of the early-twentieth century directly.

In terms of a theory of comedy, Wells's novel functions in what Northrop Frye would call an ironic mode in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), and it would be safe to argue that this mode would come to dominate narratives of nuclear apocalypses in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For Frye, "in ironic comedy we begin to see that art has also a lower limit in actual life. This is the condition of savagery, the world in which comedy consists of inflicting pain on a helpless victim, and tragedy in enduring it. Ironic comedy brings us the figure of the scapegoat ritual and the nightmare dream, the human symbol that concentrates our fears and hates. We pass the boundary of art when this symbol becomes existential."¹⁰⁹ Though Frye is primarily engaged here with individual human figures, I cannot help but to map directly upon Wells's bomb an expanded notion of this scapegoat ritual and nightmare dream.¹¹⁰ For the victims Wells and most subsequent writers imagine are helpless and (often) "blameless" (i.e., who possibly is powerful enough to prevent a nuclear bomb from inflicting pain?). The nuclear bomb functions as a referential scapegoat or *pharmakos*.¹¹¹ Its mere existence transposes it into a symbol of human hubris, evil, and pointless violence, of a profoundly corrupt and unjust society¹¹²; it becomes an existential symbol clearly passing the boundaries of art. Simultaneously, however, the nuclear bomb may be said to be "innocent"; it is not capable of action, and whatever destruction it may provoke, someone or something else is to blame. Furthermore, nuclear irony has the tendency to become comic in its very repetitive banality, as scapegoating the mere fact of nuclear weapons verges on rhetorically delivering *only* the message that they are "bad" and to be avoided at all costs—a nightmare beyond all others. Not only does Wells's novel inaugurate a comedic mode in which the nuclear narrative is fulfilled in an ultimately positive manner, but it does so through ironic treatment of its subject matter.

This is not, however, to ignore that apocalyptic literature often functions as tragedy, and nuclear narratives do as well, but rather, as it would come to serve as a baseline text and archetype for much of the nuclear imagination which would succeed it, *The World Set Free*, in textually privileging comedy as a mode of approaching a nuclear eschaton, creates an altogether different temporal space defined by the bomb than previous apocalyptic literature. In his chapter on the apocalyptic nature of Shakespeare's tragedies, Kermode writes: "In tragedy the cry of woe does not end succession; the great crises and ends of human life do not stop time."¹¹³ The tragic aspect of the Shakespearean Apocalypse is a result of the awareness that though Othello may have a "tock" (or a narrative end), Shakespeare "will not pretend that the clock does not go forward"; time will move forward ceaselessly and mercilessly, and the localized tragic Apocalypse is made all the more tragic by its insignificance in the grand temporal order of things. This is not the case in Wells, for though time goes forward after the atomic wars (in a sense), they were so shattering as to effectively change the parameters of humans' very relationship to time: they stopped the human temporal order of being in the "middest" and inaugurated a utopian temporality, one which is ceaselessly moving forward toward humanity's perfection. Furthermore, this is a temporal space unbounded by the Augustinian aporias of time as it removes the concept of "origin" from the distant past and firmly locates it in the present, as noted above. The future as well is equally transposed upon the present. As Karenin lies dying in the last few pages, he imagines that "very soon now, old Sun, I shall launch myself at you, and I shall reach you and I shall put my foot on your spotted face, and tug you about by your fiery locks [. . .]. Yes—long ago, long ago before I had stripped off a few thousand generations, dust now and forgotten, I was a hairy savage and I pointed my hand at you and—clearly I remember it—I saw you in a net. Have you forgotten that, old Sun?"¹¹⁴ This is a teleological and

temporally liminal projection of human progress if there ever was one, as it obviously ascribes upon the whole of human history a utopian project of completely harnessing the forces of the physical universe. Atomic war was merely a misstep, the grand endeavor of splitting the atom an inevitable outcome of Promethean striving. As opposed to the tragic apocalypse, total and global nuclear war if it does not wholly stop the clock, at least makes it pause and turn off in another direction for Wells, or, as Augustine attempted to do, it houses the past and future within the present. And this perhaps represents his most significant early contribution to nuclear literature: that nuclear war is so huge, so unimaginable, so real even if ultimately unrepresentable, that it is capable, at least as it is presented to the imagination, of redefining temporal experience itself. It is the mother of all peripeteia, and if it still participates in the teleological traditions of apocalypse as revelation and fulfillment, it must do so upon wholly secular, material, and scientific lines—time itself, after the bomb, can only be understood in and through the very matter of what made it possible in the *present*. Said another way, Wells effectively takes us from the world of divine comedy to nuclear comedy. The legacies of Wells's nuclear irony, then, are still being felt today, perhaps most visibly in the work of Pynchon and Wallace.

But there is a further, more sinister and disturbing irony at the heart of Wells's novel, and it is one which must strike one as significant if, as I have been trying to emphasize, there is an intimate relationship between the nuclear imagination and the projection of global risk. Indeed, Wells may himself be held to some account in imagining nuclear weapons for their actual, material appearance. In his recent book on nuclear weapons after the Cold War, *The Seventh Decade* (2007), Jonathan Schell emphasizes the virtual inevitability of the invention of the nuclear bomb. Long before the U.S. dropped the bomb on Hiroshima—itself understood as an inevitability since no one, not even Harry Truman, *decided* to use it (i.e. from its inception it was

always *assumed* that it would be used)¹¹⁵—the bomb figured prominently in the imagination of scientists and statesmen as a *thought*, and it is a thought that may be traced directly to Wells’s imaginative door. In histories of the nuclear bomb this story has become apocryphal, particularly in the important account given by Richard Rhodes in *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (1986), but for my purposes it very much bears repeating:

In truth, the sources of the bomb’s momentum were rooted in the structure of the modern scientific enterprise. In the beginning, the bomb was a thought. More specifically, it was a thought in the mind of the Hungarian scientist Leo Szilard, who, while crossing a street in London one day in 1933, came to believe that a nuclear chain reaction was possible, and that, if it were so, the very survival of human life would be in jeopardy. The thought was the marriage of a scientific experiment (James Chadwick’s discovery of the neutron in 1932) *and a work of science fiction* (H.G. Wells’ futuristic novel of 1914, *The World Set Free*, in which he foresaw atomic war). A few years later, Szilard obtained patents on some of the processes involved in chain reactions and deeded them to the British Admiralty, which, he hoped, would keep them secret from the war-bound world. It was history’s first attempt at nuclear nonproliferation, and it of course failed.¹¹⁶

The genealogy of nuclear warfare is clear here. Wells provides the necessary imaginative work to bring nuclear bombs into being. And though Szilard and Wells are of course admirable in that each attempted to prevent the reality of nuclear war, it cannot be denied that in imagining nuclear war’s possibility *textually*, Wells paved the way for its *reality*. The darkly comedic failing of Wells and Szilard to prevent the horror both so clearly imagined is ironic in the extreme. Like the imaginative momentum of the inevitability of the bomb, of the momentum of technological change that Adams’s felt so strongly, nuclear “irony possesses an inherent tendency to gain

momentum and not to stop until it has run its full course; from the small and apparently innocuous exposure of a small self-deception it soon reaches the dimensions of the absolute.”¹¹⁷ Though this quotation comes from Paul de Man speaking more generally of literary irony, his words resonate deeply with the irony at the heart of the nuclear imagination: that the bombing of Hiroshima was always already a repetitive catastrophe; it was a direct result of a more-or-less innocuous cautionary tale which, looked upon in retrospect, “reaches the dimensions of the absolute.”

Though this is surely not to lay much (if any) of the blame for our current nuclear predicament at the feet of a novel of speculative fiction written nearly one hundred years ago that was mostly engaged with the coming European conflict (let alone another one twenty-five years in the future), it is to suggest that not only was the nuclear referent already functioning quite profoundly before even the empirical possibility of the nuclear bomb became a reality, but that imaginative narrativization of catastrophe into a formula of perpetual crisis, as seen in the gross proliferation of this type of narrative in the fields of both history and nuclear literature, has deep affinities with materiality in-and-of-itself. To view the bomb as an inevitable outcome of the scientific regime of the early-twentieth century is surely not incorrect, but this should not subsequently blind us to the imagination’s implication in this inevitability. Following the revitalization of nuclear criticism I am proposing, if what nuclear war threatens is the total destruction of the archive, this destruction is always already contained in the archive itself. Consequently, if American history narrativizes itself catastrophically, it is to the archive of the imaginative construction of catastrophe and crisis that we must turn to understand the *reality* of the proliferation and repetition of disaster.

1.5 NUKE THE MOON: DECLASSIFYING THE LONG NUCLEAR TWENTIETH CENTURY

Is it our fault if the networks are simultaneously real, like nature, narrated, like discourse, and collective, like society?

—Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*¹¹⁸

A recent bit of information has been declassified that is so ridiculous it has to be true: “the United States planned to *blow up the moon* with a nuclear bomb in the 1950s as a display of the country’s strength during the Cold War space race.”¹¹⁹

If nothing else, such a story reveals two things. First, it is incredible the things that we did *not* know about the Cold War until relatively recently. This is crazy. Blowing up the moon. This is even crazier than MAD.¹²⁰ Who knows what kinds of effects that much radiation in space would have, let alone the effects upon the moon’s gravitational pull—and all this just to play a game of intimidation? So second, I think I can suggest that this idea basically *defines* the nuclear imagination, in all of its absurdity, horror, and irony. Not only can we imagine it, I think the image above will testify that this is also in fact a very *old* twentieth century imaginary. In one of the most iconic images of early cinema, an image that initiated the rocket dreams of the twentieth century, we were *nuking the moon*. That the U.S. Defense Department went so far as to set the plans in motion for its *possibility* made this was part of, what . . . “risk projection”? This is the kind of *Dr. Strangelove*-type irony that I will continually return to throughout what follows.



Figure 1: *A Trip to the Moon* (dir. George Méliès, 1902).

This dissertation is divided into roughly four different sections of unequal length and emphasis. My engagement with the work of David Foster Wallace is the most extensive and most assiduously researched. With his death in 2008, I had the opportunity when I began writing in 2010 to actually read everything. Everything he had published, every critical essay, book, and the important book reviews. Nearly all the interviews. Even the juvenilia and miscellany. Of course I would have preferred that he had kept living and writing, but I had the opportunity to begin from a position of archival totality when I started writing about him, a rare position to be in indeed. So I was perhaps a bit more encyclopedic than necessary. This section has since been

revised into two different articles. The section discussing *Infinite Jest* (1996) has been significantly shortened and polished in its published version. But I would like to include here the original draft, which was nearly twice as long, because I think it stands as a testament to a particular moment during which this dissertation originally took shape. It also stands as a testament to a moment before Wallace's legacy started to be more clearly defined. Since I wrote this section, Wallace's posthumous novel, *The Pale King* (2011), a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize (in a year which none was granted), has appeared. A volume of his uncollected essays, *Both Flesh and Not* (2012) and two volumes of interviews have been published. Columbia University Press has published his undergraduate philosophy thesis, *Fate Time and Language: An Essay on Free Will* (2011). He is largely understood to be the basis of two characters in his contemporaries' novels, Richard Katz in Franzen's *Freedom* and Leonard Bankhead in Jeffery Eugenides's *The Marriage Plot* (2011). Franzen has written a weird self-serving "elegy" for Wallace.¹²¹ And D.T. Max has released a somewhat disappointing biography: *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* (2012). With the benefit of more material, however, I do not believe that I would significantly revise what I have to say about Wallace.

If anything, discussing *The Pale King* would provide an even more appropriate conclusion than my current discussion of his short story, "Datum Centurio," as evidence of what I call "hyperarchival realism." *The Pale King* refines Wallace's sense of the archive, particularly at the level of the institution and the state. The boredom he tries to achieve both through his prose and his characters is a direct result of a *procedural* engagement with the data in the archive. The IRS, hyperarchivalists *par excellence*, represent the potential for archival emergence in a different direction than the Entertainment in *Infinite Jest* (1996). Rather than something so entertaining one can't look away, *The Pale King* presents something so boring that

to continue looking requires Zen-like patience and attention. It is not the *spectacle* of archival emergence that is threatening here. It is the senseless lack of emergence in archival processes' banal proceduralism. To continue to be engaged, then, transforms from apocalyptically threatening to a heroic impossibility. I must be happy, however, to leave such further work and thinking to the future, particularly further discussion about procedure with regard to mega-texts.

In [Chapter 4](#), “The Inverted Nuke in the Garden: David Foster Wallace’s Archival Apocalypse,” my discussion about Wallace’s career primarily revolves around his early conception of postmodern metafiction’s project as eschatological. Recursively doubling and tripling back upon the nuclear imagination, particularly of the Pynchonian sort, Wallace explicitly attempts to achieve an anti-eschatological aesthetic, a sense of narrative without the national fantasy of MAD. His refusal to ever truly “end” any of his novels is only the most obvious example of this project. More important was how Wallace engaged with a sense of textuality, an engagement that transformed from *The Broom of the System* (1987), to “Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way” (1989), to *Infinite Jest*. In the latter novel, his identification of aesthetic self-reference and eschatology achieves a striking expression of twentieth century anxieties in his construction of the Entertainment. Here, the nuclear bomb aimed at the archive in Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973) becomes an archive aimed at the world. That today this representation of contemporaneity seems all the more accurate, as we all stare at our screens, is only one of the many testaments to Wallace’s continuing power.

[Chapter 2](#), “By the Bomb’s Late Light: Prefiguring the Nuclear Imagination,” continues the work of my brief discussion of Henry Adams, H.G. Wells, and Leo Szilard by tracing certain nuclear strands through pre-Cold War American literature. Some of these threads are pulled through some obvious places—J. Robert Oppenheimer and Gertrude Stein’s aphoristic

comments on the Bomb—and some are less obvious. My reading of Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself” (1855) is probably the most idiosyncratic in the entire dissertation, but as it positions my reading of American literature on principally *machinic* grounds, it seems an appropriate starting point, particularly for the discussion that follows. Ending with a considered and careful reading of Williams’s *Spring and All*, I describe, demonstrate, and sketch some of the stakes of the nuclear imagination, which I distinguish from an apocalyptic, romantic imagination.

“Crystallizing Nuclear Temporality: Thomas Pynchon and Archival History,” [the third chapter](#), intensively traces the nuclear referent in Pynchon’s work. Reading his primary project as a critique of what I call the optical society, of how modernity and postmodernity have shared in the similar project of physically capturing light, I discuss time, narrative, information technology, and nuclear warfare in his novels. I have sections devoted to *Mason & Dixon* (1997) and *Against the Day* (2006). I discuss *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973) in a number of ways. And *Inherent Vice* (2009) receives considerable attention around the intersections between the origins of the Internet and the US Department of Defense. Pynchon’s *oeuvre* is perhaps the densest body of American literature published in the last fifty years, particularly if one considers, as I do, his novels as one massive historical fiction. Consequently, though my reading of him depends upon paying attention to highly selective moments, and indeed, to do much else would require a few more pages than I have at my disposal, I hope that I have created at least a convincing narrative about how to understand his body of work. Of course, if anyone could benefit from further nuclear critical forays, it would be Pynchon, whose career imposingly straddles both the first and second nuclear ages.

The organization of this dissertation roughly corresponds to the various conclusions I have come to about American literary production of the long nuclear twentieth century. During

the first nuclear age Adams's symbol for modernity—the dynamo—was capable of capturing the bomb within its tropological force. Today, twenty years into the second nuclear age, the dominant (metaphorical) structure of the control society—the distributed network—encourages us to read the nuclear in terms of network phenomena. Each individual section of this dissertation could and probably should be read as self-contained, individual dynamos. Strung together, however, I hope they create a distributed network of competing and complementary forces, outlining a constellation that points toward the different narratives necessary for imagining alternatives to eschatological discourse. My coda is a true coda: it repeats some of the motifs of the dissertation while changing and sending them in new directions. The most self-contained section of the dissertation, I hope it also points toward new ways forward not only for nuclear criticism, but for thinking about hyperarchivalism and mega-texts.

It has been both a joy and a horror exorcising my fascinations and anxieties. If anything, thinking about mega-death day in and day out for three years has left me sick to death of the apocalypse. If by the end the reader chooses also to be sick to death of the apocalypse, then I can only say that I have achieved my goals. Certain threads have inevitably been left dangling, and certain other trajectories deserve to be revisited and taken up, but this is how it is in a world that does not end. That said, I hope I have demonstrated throughout the power of the imagination, and the power of nonhuman forces to both shape and be shaped by the human. As our ontological horizon looks to be increasingly defined by informatics and algorithms, understanding hyperarchival relations to crisis will become increasingly paramount. The need to continually renew a sense of the world not dependent upon crisis, a view that may very well depend upon the kind of attention Wallace outlined in his 2005 Kenyon Commencement Address, is a difficult task indeed. Hopefully, however, it will not be as hard as reminding

ourselves, “this is water. This is water.”¹²² Now let’s wave our cowboy hats as we gallop into the flame.

2.0 BY THE BOMB'S LATE LIGHT: PREFIGURING THE NUCLEAR IMAGINATION

*The unfettered clouds and region of the Heavens,
Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light—
Were all like the workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree;
Characters of the great Apocalypse,
The types and symbols of Eternity,
Of first, and last, and midst, and without end.*

—William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*¹²³

Man finds himself on the earth whether he likes it or not, with nowhere else to go.

—William Carlos Williams, “An Essay on *Leaves of Grass*”¹²⁴

2.1 SKETCHING A NUCLEAR POETICS

One of the big claims I want to make in this dissertation involves arguing that the nuclear imagination is distinct from something like a more general apocalyptic imagination, and one of my tasks in this chapter will be to emphasize its divergence from religious eschatologies, and, most importantly, to sketch the unique features of what I will often for shorthand simply call *the nuclear*. I legitimately fear, however, blurring the distinction between the two imaginaries. For one thing, the sheer size of the Judeo-Christian apocalyptic corpus means that a thorough

engagement with this tradition is well beyond the scope and ambition of the current study.¹²⁵

Further, I do not want to belabor this distinction too much, for I feel that, treated rigorously, one may very well find little difference between certain kinds of religious and secular visions of the end—whether one wants to represent them as revelations of eternity or as bold projections of global risk¹²⁶—for the simple reason that both eschatologies speculate about a future that cannot be known beforehand. And ultimately, I do not find this a problem: it should not surprise us that there may be similarities between different manifestations of the imagination, particularly of the speculative kind. Since it is the *imagination* that is the overarching subject of inquiry in this chapter, there will be certain inevitable consistencies between two different forms of literary expression historically engaged with the horizon of humanity and the ends of the human¹²⁷ (even if these two imaginaries fundamentally disagree about the meaning of these ends).

But as I suggest in [Chapter 1](#), I am less interested in the more traditional (and supernatural) eschatological boundaries of the imagination in this dissertation. So if I choose to quickly gloss over an apocalyptic owing more to St. John of Patmos and St. Augustine than to Henry Adams, H.G. Wells, and Leo Szilard, part of this is because I feel that many of the similarities and differences between the natural and supernatural in various twentieth century apocalypses have been admirably explored in a number of valuable monographs and collections.¹²⁸ The other part is that I feel like my understanding of the nuclear imagination is, both here and in subsequent chapters, unique, and that my explorations of the postmodern imaginaries of Thomas Pynchon and David Foster Wallace address, demonstrate, and enact many of the differences between the nuclear imagination and the Christian apocalyptic.¹²⁹

Principal among these is my understanding of the nuclear imagination as the capacity to historically project a materially embodied, temporally limited, human-“controlled” *force* capable

of extinguishing the species without any sort of “revelation.”¹³⁰ (One is tempted to call such a perspective a “natural naturalism,” or less awkwardly, simply naturalism or materialism.)

Further, it is quite important that this understanding makes little distinction between fantasy and reality. In doing so, my nuclear critical perspective attempts, if not to eliminate, then to at least propose a (temporary) work-around of the debates that took place during the first decade of nuclear criticism, the arguments between what I call in [Chapter 1](#) “deconstructive nuclear criticism” and “ethical nuclear criticism.” As I argue there, my mode of nuclear criticism conceives of the nuclear as something that has influenced a significant body of literature, and as something that has produced and emerged *from* a significant body of literature. Consequently, even a cursory glance at the proliferation of disaster fantasies and apocalyptic texts during the nuclear age(s) gives the nuclear critic access to a historical subjectivity introduced by humans’ eschatological agency unavailable to previous scholars. Though whether this “postmodern subject” understands her own projection into the future as historical, or is a subject who, in Fredric Jameson’s terms, has experienced “a consequent weakening of historicity,”¹³¹ is up for debate, either subject position understands that the capability of producing an eschaton through the nuclear is the result of human agency rather than divine (and inaccessible) judgment. This nuclear critical perspective also understands the power of a textually constructed, archival proliferation of disaster fantasy to shape that very history. Therefore, I read the nuclear as both an emergent literary trope, an idea that undeniably influences the activities of peoples and nations, and, simultaneously, something catastrophically material and real. Because of this, and because we can now begin to definitively see the persistence of the nuclear in the present, even as the nuclear imagination of the Cold War and the first nuclear age becomes more distant, we can begin to sketch a number of the increasingly complex relationships the nuclear imagination

has to a variety of global activities that may very well have little to do with an eschatological limit beyond which the human cannot go.

At its simplest, however, the predominant mode by which the nuclear imagination found expression, during the twentieth century and beyond, was through narrative. Temporally, the nuclear inhabits the curious position of being both stubbornly “to come” and in the past, putting it always already in a slippery narrative situation.¹³² There are a number of larger outcomes that result from the nuclear bomb’s temporal situation (many of which I suggest that Pynchon addresses in his fiction). Perhaps most importantly in the American sphere, in the wake of Hiroshima and well beyond, US cultural production has often avoided or failed to do what Sigmund Freud calls the “work of mourning”¹³³ through the speculative narrative fantasy of Mutually Assured Destruction. (This failure continues to be visible in the contemporary post-apocalyptic survival spectacle of Hollywood cinema and American television, for instance.) MAD, however, is simply one very clear example of how narrative often fails to respond to the nuclear event. Such responses and subsequent failures should not surprise us, and as we move in many ways past this particular nuclear narrative into other less monolithic disaster narratives, the difficulty of grasping the nuclear, let alone representing it, may indeed reveal that something like narration may be required to approach it. Among many other narratives, the tales of nuclear crisis the State tells itself, and the various institutions built to wage *and* prevent thermonuclear war, can be understood as narrative-inflected responses to the nuclear sublime.¹³⁴ The nuclear bomb, with all its resistance to mimesis, becomes scalable within the spatial and temporal limits of narrative. And these limits have very real effects in the political and material realms of human activity.

But to suggest that narrative exhausts, or even represents the ground of the nuclear imagination is not only to profoundly underestimate its impact on ideological and cultural formations, but does a disservice to the possibilities of the imagination itself. Further, this is to suggest that it is often inappropriate, and perhaps at times even wrong to privilege narrative with regard to the nuclear imaginary. Rather than acknowledging what Derrida calls “the uniqueness of nuclear war, its being-for-the-first-time-and-perhaps-for-the-last-time, its absolute inventiveness,”¹³⁵ there is a quite understandable tendency, in twentieth century fiction and elsewhere, that understands both MAD and more localized uses of nuclear weapons through oftentimes quite ancient narratological structures and archetypes.

My goal in this chapter, consequently, is twofold. First, I would like to argue that what I call the nuclear imagination, after emerging in Adams’s dynamo, finds expression during a variety of moments of the early twentieth century. There are of course a great many paths down which to pursue such expression. To fully work out the ways in which the nuclear imagination might be said to have articulated itself between Adams and Hiroshima would require a study of its own. So though I have chosen to limit my inquiry of American modernism and its articulation of the nuclear imagination to the poetry of William Carlos Williams, in particular his experimental book *Spring and All* (1923), I find in him a particularly significant moment in which questions of the imagination, materiality, and eschatology in US poetry are posed. My reading of Williams demonstrates what is at stake for me in locating the nuclear prior to the Second World War, but also demonstrates the flexibility of a nuclear critical approach, and, I hope, the ways in which poetry is able to access important aspects of the nuclear imagination that do not depend upon the bomb’s historical facticity alone. As so many of the narrative approaches to the bomb depend upon this facticity—i.e., the various narratives produced by the bomb’s

historicity and MAD's "to come"—*Spring and All* presents a way of approaching a nuclear imagination not limited to the epoch of the Cold War alone, and provides many of the terms for my reading of the nuclear as it passes into the second nuclear age. Further, reading Williams's work as nuclear in particular ways not only permits my subsequent reading of Pynchon and Wallace, but allows me to trace a longer genealogy for the nuclear imagination in my reading of Walt Whitman as a particularly important precursor to Williams. This is not necessarily to suggest that Whitman can responsibly be called "nuclear," but it is to suggest that Williams's nuclear imagination did not somehow spring fully formed into the world, and that a Deleuzian reading of Whitman through the early thought of Manuel De Landa makes Williams's distinct achievement much clearer.

Second, it is one of the contentions of this chapter that the difference between a lyric and narrative impulse is considerable when it comes to how texts throughout the twentieth century have gone about representing nuclear bombs and addressing the nuclear condition(s) of modernity. Indeed, it would be an understatement to say that there are a great number of American poets who make available distinct formulations of the nuclear that are simply inaccessible to narrative. The dominance of the novel and of narrative film during the twentieth century as cultural forms, not least in being sites where (often spectacular) massive destruction was represented in highly visible ways, has oftentimes obscured US poetry's contribution to, emergence from, and complicity with the nuclear. Further, as Daniel Grausam has nicely demonstrated, US postmodern metafiction's concern with problematizing narrative may very well be best understood in terms of narratological problems introduced by the bomb.¹³⁶ So I feel that to adequately address questions about postmodern metafiction, it is necessary to first address, if even briefly, the poetics of the nuclear. Not only are both Pynchon and Wallace's

attention to language too refined to ignore their lyric impulse, but their refusal to represent nuclear war is more in line with certain developments in postmodern poetry than it is with wider trends in US fiction during the Cold War. Principal among these is how, as Bruce Comens points out about Louis Zukofsky's poetry—particularly his long poem "A" (1978)—postmodern poetry often "adamantly refuses rhetorics of totalization, of apocalyptic breakthroughs."¹³⁷ Narrative, with its moments of crisis and *peripeteia*, and its subsequent resolution (or lack thereof), often depends for its sense-making upon just such apocalyptic breakthroughs and totalization. So in short, one cannot adequately understand the nuclear imagination if one restricts themselves exclusively to narrative, even such complex novels as those written by Pynchon and Wallace. To locate what is distinct about the nuclear in its ability to articulate a number of imaginaries, narrative and otherwise, the persistence of its sublimely attractive destructiveness, and the fluidity with which it is translatable in quite different historical situations, requires looking at a form capable of doing types of literary work unavailable to narrative alone.

Consequently, this chapter will approach the nuclear imagination in a fashion that abjures strict chronological organization in order to unpack and highlight the aspects of the nuclear imagination that distinguish it from other imaginaries and to sketch aspects of its "absolute inventiveness" (that will be more fully developed in [Chapters 3 and 4](#)). Beginning with a brief detour through two initial reactions to the bomb in the mid-1940s—the quite different though strangely complementary reflections by J. Robert Oppenheimer and Gertrude Stein—the second section will then turn to a sustained reading of Walt Whitman that owes much to Manuel De Landa's reading of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's notion of the "machinic phylum." My initial turn toward "Song of Myself" (1855) has a number of motivations that will hopefully become clear as the chapter progresses. Primary among these, however, is how complementary

D.H. Lawrence's seminal reconsideration of Whitman in his *Studies in Classic American Literature* is to Williams's poetics in *Spring and All* (both books of course initially published in 1923). Williams, along with countless others, has long been understood as an inheritor of Whitman's poetic project, and the convergence of Lawrence and Williams's thinking in 1923 can be traced not only to the literary excitement bred in the immediate wake T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) and James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), but to the continuing impact and relevance of Whitman's voice. The third section of this chapter will then turn toward a reading of *Spring and All* that attempts to articulate and define the nuclear imagination in distinction to other imaginaries, particularly the romantic imagination. My discussion of Williams views *Spring and All* as a paradigmatic expression of the nuclear imagination, and though obviously there are any number of other places one might go to trace the emergence of a nuclear poetics, *Spring and All* is so thorough in its articulation of Williams's unique conception of the imagination that one is left wanting little else for defining the nuclear imagination.

2.2 MAPPING THE NUCLEAR PRESENT: J. ROBERT OPPENHEIMER AND GERTRUDE STEIN

One of the immediate challenges of attempting to locate a nuclear imagination prior to the atomic detonations at Alamogordo, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki is contending with the feeling, both among the scientists responsible for the bomb and in the world at large, that atomic weaponry introduced something ontologically unique and novel into history, that there is an "absolute inventiveness" the potential for nuclear war gives to thought unavailable prior to 1945. In his admirable study of the literary texts that influenced (as well as the literary texts produced by) the

scientists involved with the Manhattan Project at Los Alamos, however, John Canady points out that “the Los Alamos¹³⁸ shared with [Albert] Einstein [. . .] a sense that the advent of atomic weapons introduced a radical change in the conditions of human social existence. Yet these same scientists maintained an equally strong belief in the continuity and benevolence of the scientific tradition that had produced these bombs.”¹³⁹ The atomic bomb did not come out of nowhere. It clearly emerges from a long tradition of Enlightenment thought, the radical advances in physics during the early twentieth century, and the complex political and historical realities of the Second World War. This genealogy often makes the bomb’s appearance seem all but inevitable from certain perspectives on the history of modern Western Europe.¹⁴⁰ Given these basic factors, it is difficult to look back upon that history and see the onset of nuclear technology as radical break or rupture with history, as something that is truly and radically new.

Nonetheless, from the very inception of atomic weapons, most view them as something new. As Canady notes about the bomb’s “father”: “like many of his colleagues, [J.] Robert Oppenheimer turned to metaphors of a new world to describe his complex response to the successful detonation of the first atomic bomb in the Jornada del Muerto desert.”¹⁴¹ Significantly, Oppenheimer, who had the most direct knowledge of the bomb, both as a scientist and as the director of the Manhattan Project, when recalling his experience of the Trinity test, wrote in 1946:

When it went off, in the New Mexico dawn, that first atomic bomb, we thought of Alfred Nobel, of his hope, his vain hope, that dynamite would put an end to wars. We thought of the legend of Prometheus, of that deep sense of guilt in man’s new powers, that reflects his recognition of evil, and his long knowledge of it. We knew that it was a new world,

but even more we knew that novelty itself was a very old thing in human life, that all our ways are rooted in it.¹⁴²

Later, in one of the more famous statements made about atomic weaponry, Oppenheimer further interpreted his initial experience in the New Mexico desert:

We waited until the blast had passed, walked out of the shelter and then it was extremely solemn. We knew the world would not be the same. A few people laughed, a few people cried. Most people were silent. I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture, the *Bhagavad-Gita*: Vishnu is trying to persuade the Prince that he should do his duty and to impress him he takes on his multi-armed form and says, “Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.” I suppose we all thought that, one way or another.¹⁴³

There is a striking encounter in Oppenheimer’s words between representations of the nuclear as something radically new, and as something traditional, archetypal, and mythical. Oppenheimer’s comparison between a relatively ancient figure of eschatological destruction, and his own responsibility for the first explosion of an atomic bomb is revealing: faced with the sheer reality of the bomb, he immediately extrapolates the logic of nuclear weapons taken to their utmost limit, imposing an ancient narratological and mythical interpretation of the Trinity test rather than having recourse to a discourse which is not only capable of explaining this initial experience of the nuclear, but which has, quite simply, produced it as well: namely, atomic physics. As Canady puts it, “Oppenheimer’s naming of the test ‘Trinity,’ [. . .] asserts that the bomb’s ‘meaning’ should be as important to its scientific observers as its destructive power. [. . .] By situating their ‘immediate’ reactions in this way, the Los Alamosites’ use of religious literature took advantage of their ability to remove themselves from potentially debilitating awareness of

the physical ‘terror’ of their work into a more abstract consideration of its metaphysical terrors.”¹⁴⁴

The Los Alamoses’ reading and interpretation of the bomb demonstrate some of the ways in which previous eschatological imaginaries can be insufficient for understanding it. Rather than grasp that the nuclear introduces something ontologically unique into history, for Oppenheimer and many others, it is merely the physical manifestation of one the oldest tropes: the embodiment and deification of death. In Oppenheimer’s vision, as in most nuclear narratives, the bomb quickly becomes a metaphor for something else, because of or even despite its radical materiality and novelty. Indeed, its radical newness for Oppenheimer can only be understood in the sense that “novelty itself was a very old thing in human life.” Whatever it is that is essentially “new” for Oppenheimer can only be understood through the strange turn of claiming that novelty is itself not unique, that the emergence of the new frequently occurs, repetitively, throughout history, thereby immediately deemphasizing the radicality of the bomb. The bomb, rather than something Oppenheimer could very well understand through the very scientific discourse that brought it about, something that, though with firm roots in a linear progression of scientific discovery and experimentation, still marks a break with the world of Newtonian mechanics and the emergence into reality of an unprecedented destructive power, cannot be permitted to be “new” at all. To ascribe it such novelty would require taking full responsibility for its very real effects and the massive death it would shortly cause, something that Oppenheimer either refuses or is unable to do (at least in the moments quoted above). By interpreting the bomb as the manifestation of the supernatural and thus the very ancient, Oppenheimer’s words obscure the bomb’s emergent facticity and historicity.

Something similar occurs in Gertrude Stein's famous resistance to the novelty of the bomb. When asked what she "thought of the atomic bomb" in 1946, Stein said that she "had not been able to take any interest in it," writing:

What is the use, if [atomic bombs] are really as destructive as all that there is nothing left and if there is nothing there nobody to be interested and nothing to be interested about. If they are not as destructive as all that then they are just little more or less destructive than other things and that means that in spite of all destruction there are always lots left on this earth to be interested or to be willing and the thing that destroys is just one of the things that concerns the people inventing it or the people starting it off, but really nobody else can do anything about it so you have to just live along like always, so you see the atomic (bomb) is not at all interesting, not any more interesting than any other machine, and machines are only interesting in being invented or in what they do, so why be interested.¹⁴⁵

For Stein, there is not anything unique or novel about the atomic bomb at all. Rather than find some appropriate preexisting interpretive frame to understand the bomb, thereby turning it into a trope for this or that, inscribing some metaphysical and abstract meaning to its brute reality, making it manifest some ancient figure of death and destruction, Stein resists ascribing a distinctly literary meaning to it at all, resists making it into a metaphor for anything. Rather, the bomb for her is primarily yet another example of *technology*, not any more or less interesting than other machines. Since what this machine "does" is destroy things—and after things are destroyed they cannot be "interesting"—the machinic nature of the bomb for Stein is no different than any other technology. The only reason it is even on her radar has little to do with what it actually is, and much more to do with how much people are talking about it. The clamor about

the bomb continues less because it is frightening, than because “[e]verybody gets so much information all day long that they lose their common sense. They listen so much that they forget to be natural.”¹⁴⁶

Stein’s position is understandable in many ways. If the bomb really is destructive enough to destroy all life on earth, then there is nothing to talk about. Faced with this finite horizon of extinction, there is nothing to say in the nihilistic face of such massive destruction. On the other hand, if the bomb is merely more destructive than other things, but not eschatological, it is as ultimately uninteresting as all the other technologies humans have produced to kill and destroy. The bomb only has power, in Stein’s formulation, because of how much people are talking about it, how much information is let loose into the world about it. The bomb produces an excess of language, an overflowing of information and meaning which covers over the fact that the bomb’s dumb reality cannot be given meaning, it cannot be incorporated into a human scale and thereby made “interesting,” by being discussed.

Both Oppenheimer and Stein’s attempts to understand the bomb reveal that, however it be understood, there is something strangely linguistic about certain encounters with the machinic harnessing of (atomic) material force.¹⁴⁷ Its sheer fact is not interesting to Stein (despite the fact that what it “does,” is destroy matter itself). The reason we are under the delusion that it is interesting is because of how much people are listening to talk about it. The excess of information, even in mid-century, produces the delusion that the bomb is an interesting subject. It cannot be interesting in-itself, but only through what people say about it (and then it still is not interesting). Likewise, when Oppenheimer bestows upon the bomb eschatological properties, it is actually his own agency he is attempting to understand, his own (new) role as a god-scientist whose capabilities now involve potentially destroying the world. Between Oppenheimer’s

understanding of the bomb as a repetition of the new, and thus as a repetition of ancient archetypal and literary structures, and Stein's emphasizing its banality and its inability to be "interesting" (as if that were the imperative of such a weapon—that it be interesting), there is a certain failure of the imagination that reveals the failure of traditional literary structures through which the bomb could be comprehended. Oppenheimer's complex (and confusing) array of literary and scientific markers—the *Bhagavad Gita*, the legend of Prometheus, Nobel's hope for dynamite's prevention of further wars—signals his inability to place the Trinity test in history. Likewise, Stein's refusal to find something "interesting" in the bomb refuses to acknowledge the reality of its use and to incorporate the bomb into the important work that literature does. In not even mentioning the horrors of Hiroshima or Nagasaki, even in acknowledging that the bomb is yet another manifestation of human violence, Stein in her aphorism on the bomb fails to understand its historical impact and the importance (or "interestingness") of its existence as very real human technology with profound effects upon human realities.

Stein and Oppenheimer's attempts to understand the impact and meaning (or lack thereof) of the bomb, then, though seemingly quite opposite—it is nothing interesting for Stein, it is the harnessing of god-like power for Oppenheimer—display some of the mimetic challenges in the face of the bomb's materiality. Either it is supernatural, or human, all too human; either it is radically new or an uninteresting repetition; either it is Promethean or banal; either it is ancient and mythological, or modern, machinic, and technological. For the scientist, it is literary. For the writer of *Tender Buttons* (1914) who was deeply interested in a kind of expressive phenomenology of objects, of the richness of the everyday encounter with materiality, the bomb cannot support a literary encounter due to its mechanicity (in the way, say, the food-object of

roast beef can support being “tender and changing and external and central and surrounded and singular and simple, ”¹⁴⁸ etc.).

Here, then, I think we are provided an inroad into what *is* distinct about the nuclear. Both Stein and Oppenheimer hesitate to understand the nuclear from within their own particular discursive “expertise.” Oppenheimer declines to report his initial understanding of the Trinity test within the discourse of atomic physics that produced it, and Stein declines to understand the bomb hermeneutically or tropologically. On the one hand, the bomb is overburdened with meaning, and on the other, it has none. Oppenheimer gives “meaning” to a scientific experiment that he should, traditionally, maintain a disinterested, objective distance from, and Stein emphasizes the lack of any meaning in this phenomenon whatsoever, meaning she traditionally was able to bestow on any number of things in her previous writing. These discursive reversals serve to highlight that the nuclear threatens the very structures that make certain unique discourses possible in the first place. If the very discourse of science that was used to produce the bomb is eschewed in favor of an anachronistic mythological explanation, then it is clear that the nuclear transforms (and destroys) the very discursive basis necessary to understand it, from either a literary or scientific perspective. Consequently, this is why Derrida was able to say that the uniqueness of nuclear war, its

absolute inventiveness give us to think, even if it remains a decoy, a belief, a phantasmatic projection, is obviously the possibility of an irreversible destruction, leaving no traces, of the juridico-literary archive and therefore of the basis of literature and criticism. Not necessarily the destruction of humanity, of the human habitat, or even other discourses (arts or sciences), or even indeed of poetry or the epic; these latter might reconstitute their living process and their archive, at least to the extent that the structure

of this archive (that of nonliterary memory) structurally implies reference to a real referent external to the archive itself.¹⁴⁹

One of the (many) ways I think that we can still responsibly invoke and understand Derrida's thinking in "No Apocalypse, Not Now," is to understand the failure of discourse, and thus of the imagination, to contend with the bomb's immediate reality. If, on the one hand, Stein's previous ability to make what remains an important literary achievement in *Tender Buttons* through an *archival* encounter with the everyday and the banal fails in the face of the nuclear—that the nuclear cannot even be as interesting as, say, furniture—and on the other, Oppenheimer fumbles in discursive traditions in which he does not have scholarly expertise in order to explain something he *must* understand (atomic physics), then even shortly after the bomb's initial deployments we can already see certain ways in which the (literary and scientific) archive begins to fray in the face of the nuclear. In short, the archives in which Stein and Oppenheimer reside and have expertise fail to provide sufficient understanding for both the bomb's novelty and its historicity. What the bomb has destroyed for Stein and Oppenheimer is *their* archive, the basis for not only literature and criticism, but for science as a disinterested and objective empirical investigation of reality. Consequently, if we are to frame the bomb as both something radically new *and* as something with a complex historical genealogy, I believe we are encouraged to look elsewhere than the immediate wake of the Second World War to find whatever is distinct about the nuclear imagination. If the horizon of the bomb's threat is a destruction of the archive, we must not so quickly abandon the archive to that destructive fire.

2.3 APOCALYPSE 1.0: WALT WHITMAN AND THE MACHINIC PHYLUM

The examples of J. Robert Oppenheimer and Gertrude Stein's initial encounters with the reality of nuclear weapons make clear some of the challenges of locating something that is a distinctly *nuclear* imagination by demonstrating how quickly the bomb can be fit within preexisting models of understanding, even if these models still strangely acknowledge the bomb as something novel. The recourse to literary archetypes and the vague gesture toward a history of technology display many of the slippages between the material and the metaphorical, the technological and the literary (to say nothing about how frequently and easily the bomb has been mapped upon Christian apocalyptic traditions) when the bomb is presented as an object of contemplation. In the manner that Stein approaches the bomb, for instance, it seems to be simply yet another technological invention in an epoch filled with new machines. (In other words, yes the bomb is radical, but so are tanks, machine guns, airplanes, the telephone, radar, etc.) Further, from our own (unavoidably) contemporary perspective on American history (particularly in the wake of 11 September 2001), the nuclear events of the Second World War, no matter how utterly horrific, are increasingly difficult to understand as a radical rupture in history for the simple reason that the current narratives told about the twentieth century (and other historical narratives of periods well before then) involve invoking any number of crises and ruptures, and speculation about the immediate and far future involve increasingly diverse imagined crises as well.¹⁵⁰

Locating whatever it is that is unique to the nuclear as it manifests in history is then even more challenging because it seems impossible to construct any narrative of history or global futurity that is not in some sense always already catastrophic. What I mean by catastrophic here is that, without much effort, one can recall a litany of events that when invoked in their commonplace

sense become narrativized as breaking with the past, catastrophically changing the parameters of history. The oft-commented upon lack of a collectively deep sense of a historical and archival past for those living in the United States has, among many other factors, made a cruel irony out of Karl Marx's famous refinement of G.W.F. Hegel's dictum: "that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce."¹⁵¹ The defining events of US history appear to thrust historical narratives firmly into new epochs, to be *peripeteia*: breaks, turns, moments of profound change, fissures, *caesuras*, and crises without repetition, farcical or otherwise. The irony is that it is the very *repetition of catastrophe itself* that begins to define these narratives. If there is farce to be found in American *peripeteia*, it is in the comedy that results from the real and imagined state(s) of perpetual crisis, not as a second or third iteration, but as a state of being. From this perspective, saying that the nuclear is unique in history becomes impossible because of the very ways in which most understandings of history are unavoidably narrative and organize time through tales of (perpetual) crisis.¹⁵²

For this reason I am compelled to imagine, in the manner that Manuel De Landa does in his *War in the Age of Intelligent Machines* (1991), a future robotic historian attempting to understand these narratives of perpetual crisis and catastrophe in a physical world so clearly devoid of eschatological fulfillment, a historian that I imagine would place particular emphasis on the emergence of nuclear technologies of the mid-twentieth century, and the information technologies of the late-twentieth century. Though De Landa draws upon the notion of a robotic historian attempting to understand its own origins in order to describe the steadily exponential emergence of technologies of warfare operating at higher and higher levels of self-organization and awareness (the appearance and wide use of military drones being one of the most obvious

recent examples), the genealogical affinity that imagining such a historian might have with regard to questions of the nuclear and archival accumulation (or destruction) as a result of its own textual instantiation should be evident. De Landa describes how such a historian would function:

If we disregard for a moment the fact that robotic intelligence will probably not follow the anthropomorphic line of development prepared for it by science fiction, we may without much difficulty imagine a future generation of killer robots dedicated to understanding their historical origins. We may even imagine specialized “robot historians” committed to tracing the various technological lineages that gave rise to their species. And we could further imagine that such a robot historian would write a different kind of history than would its human counterpart. While a human historian might try to understand the way people assembled clockworks, motors and other physical contraptions, a robot historian would likely place stronger emphasis on the way these machines affected human evolution. The robot would stress the fact that when clockworks once represented the dominant technology on the planet, people imagined the world around them as a similar system of cogs and wheels.¹⁵³

De Landa’s formulation of this robotic historian is interesting in how such a historian would mark changes in humanity’s imaginative construction of the world as affecting human evolution itself. Though this historian would still inevitably account for the nuclear in a narrative mode, the simple existence of nuclear and information technologies for such a historian would be physical markers of imaginative evolution, higher levels of organization within an imagination inextricably tied to our sense of the physical world, rather than yet another instantiation of supernatural eschatology. The exponential increase in the imagination of catastrophic scenarios

involving either of these technologies for such a historian —and of course, both these technologies are highly involved with one another—would represent an increasing material organization of the imagination, both in its products and effects. The eschatological perspective of nuclear annihilation, though obviously finding a rich genealogy in the apocalyptic imagination of the past, is fundamentally distinct from prior eschatologies because of the relationship between technological change and imaginative expression. And perhaps most significantly, De Landa's thinking in no way deemphasizes the role of the imagination in human existence—his thinking is careful not to instrumentalize or reify the imagination (*nor* is it necessarily progressivist, as order emerging from chaos does not occur in a linear fashion). In itself, the imagination provides access to our very materiality and vice versa. If it does so through projecting a perpetual state of crisis upon our ontic experience of the world, this robot historian could not very well ignore this development, and would find that the nuclear must both emerge from and influence the imagination simultaneously.

Central to De Landa's conception of why imagining such a robotic historian is appropriate to understanding military technologies is the notion that inorganic matter is capable of ordering itself into higher levels of organization, what is also often called "emergence":

The self-organizing processes studied by the science of "order out of chaos" (or "chaos," for short) have indeed changed the way scientists view inorganic matter. While at one time only biological phenomena were considered to be relevant for a study of evolution, now inert matter has been found to be capable of generating structures that may be subjected to natural selection. It is as if we had discovered a form of "non-organic life." With this in mind, I have borrowed from the philosopher Gilles Deleuze the concept of the "machinic phylum," the term he coined to refer to the overall set of self-organizing

processes in the universe. These include all processes in which a group of previously disconnected elements suddenly reaches a critical point at which they begin to “cooperate” to form a higher level entity.¹⁵⁴

Representations of both archival destruction and accumulation are intimately tied to the concept of self-organization into higher levels of order that the concept of the machinic phylum gives one to understand during the nuclear age. As the machinic phylum does not privilege the organic over the inorganic, it subsequently matters very little to draw a distinction between the physical reality these products of the imagination refer to and their physical instantiation in archival processes. In other words, how a text *represents* archival accumulation or destruction is intimately tied to its own material existence as a mode of organizing the imagination and presenting it materially in something always already involved in its dissolution and accumulation. The logic of the archive is inherent in material processes themselves, as the archive is at least theoretically capable of organizing itself into higher levels of order. Consequently, if one has in mind even some of the material totality that links the literary imagination and nuclear technology, one can then indeed locate something particular and unique to the nuclear: both its instantiation in weaponry and its expression in literature are emergent properties of the machinic phylum. This permits a bracketing of the problems of narrative with regard to the nuclear for it allows that both Oppenheimer and Stein are correct: the nuclear is nothing new, its radical newness is old, it fits within ancient mythical archetypes, etc. It also allows that they are more or less (completely) wrong: the nuclear imagination is an emergent singularity in modernity that arrives through the properties and operations of the machinic phylum, processes that have a relationship to the past but emerge out of the chaos of that past in radical and unforeseen ways that cannot be accounted for simply by a strict linear description of

that past (i.e. emergence can never be “predicted”), thereby making it unnecessary to make a strong distinction between organic and inorganic vitality, between what is said about the bomb and what the bomb is (or how it comes about).¹⁵⁵ Finally, this makes it all the more necessary to look at the ways in which the nuclear manifests in ways that are *not* primarily narrative, moments where the nuclear imagination emerges at particular points that are incapable of being explained by crisis and rupture, and this is precisely what poetry and the lyric impulse provide: a perspective on the nuclear imagination capable of finding its genealogical traces and prefigurations in moments one would not normally consider to be nuclear at all.

Consequently, tracing the development in American literature of the relationship between the machinic phylum and the imagination provides an appropriate starting point and foundation for such an immense and general subject as “American literature and the nuclear bomb.” The study of American literature has for quite a while now emphasized the catastrophic nature of America’s literary past; and in one of the first major studies of that literature, D.H. Lawrence, stressing how modern American literature has come to a *verge*, wrote that the initial American came to its shores “largely to get *away*—the most simple of motives. To get away. Away from what? In the long run, away from themselves. Away from everything. That’s why most people have come to America, and still do come. To get away from everything they are and have been.”¹⁵⁶ Lawrence suggests that, in the figure of Walt Whitman, this urge to get away reached its conclusion in the urge to even get away from being *human* and because of that, Whitman became mechanical, machinic, whose verge, I would like to suggest, can be seen in twentieth century engagements with the poet that are emergently nuclear.

Many view Whitman as the poet Emerson desired and foretold in his essay “The Poet” (1844), the first voice to construct a song of the nation, finally and fully being able to inaugurate

a literature appropriate to the nation's errand into the wilderness. What has not been suggested, at least to my knowledge, is that what Emerson truly desired of this "poet to come," this "liberating god,"¹⁵⁷ was a poet of the machinic phylum itself, a poet able to experience and articulate the vast horizon how organic and inorganic matter might organize itself meaningfully. When he says, "we have yet had no genius in America,"¹⁵⁸ what he really means is that there has not yet been a literary expression capable of capturing the geography and landscape of the US, of the very materiality of its contours, as "America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres."¹⁵⁹ It cannot wait long for these meters, and indeed, Emerson appears to be suggesting that the landscape itself parthenogenetically produces poetry, that it will inevitably articulate itself into song through the mere fact that humans reside within it. Poetry (or order) will emerge out of the landscape (or chaos): "What drops of all the sea of our science are baled up! and what accident it is that these are exposed, when so many secrets sleep in nature! Hence the *necessity* of speech and song; hence these throbs and heart-beatings in the orator, at the door of the assembly, to the end namely that thought may be ejaculated as Logos, as Word."¹⁶⁰ The immensity of the material order of nature *necessitates* poetry, not a quiet and romantic contemplation of nature, but a poet able to conduct the immense forces, power, and secrets residing in nature into language. And for Emerson, it is indeed the privileged aspect of the poet (or the human) to channel, *to conduct* this power. "Stand there, balked and dumb, stuttering and stammering, hissed and hooted, stand and strive, until at last rage draw out of thee that *dream*-power which every night shows thee is thine own; a power transcending all *limit and privacy*, and by virtue of which a man is the *conductor of the whole river of electricity*."¹⁶¹ In calling upon this future poet in such a manner, it should be clear that for Emerson he was to function as a kind of machinic conduit between the force(s) of

nature and the written word, as an electric generator absorbing (dumbly) all the chaos of nature before it could pattern that chaos, raging and dreaming, breaking the bonds of its own finite subjectivity, to finally channel these forces into *form*. This understanding gives a solid historical and formal foundation to a specifically nuclear critical take on American literature that the commonplace narrative of this literature does not provide in order to argue that Whitman is the first poet of the nuclear epoch (even if we can only say that today—i.e., it would be absurd to suggest that anyone thought this in Whitman’s lifetime).

Such a conception of Whitman emerges as early as 1923, when Lawrence in the concluding chapter of his *Studies in Classic American Literature* wrote of Whitman that he “was really too superhuman. The danger of the superman is that he is mechanical.”¹⁶² Whitman now is often popularly viewed as a kind of jolly father to American environmentalism. To call him mechanical would appear to ignore the deep-seated sense of ecology of a poet who spent a lifetime engaged in the observation and celebration of the relationships and interconnections between natural forces. In a Deleuzian sense, he was a poet of the rhizome, a poet of the fragmentary and multiple, of the innumerable connections between diverse nodes, whose conception of nature was as incisively narrow as it was expansive.¹⁶³ This description, however, should not blind us to what Lawrence so clearly sees: that we should perhaps take Whitman at his word when he says, “The young mechanic is closest to me . . . he knows me pretty well.”¹⁶⁴ When his lines overflow, compiling immense lists in their repeating cadence of accumulation and gathering, they become machines observing the phenomenal world while experiencing an almost anxious frenzy to report upon and merge with it. For Lawrence, who hears in this cadence the rhythms of the railroad and an approaching modernity, Whitman’s mechanization is a result of the complete ascension of matter over the immaterial, of the triumph of the body in American

literature now that “the ship of the *soul* is sunk.”¹⁶⁵ “The *Pequod* sinks with all her souls, but their bodies rise again. . . . Corpses.”¹⁶⁶ All that remains to the imagination after Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851) in Lawrence’s metaphorical construction of American Literature are bodies and matter. Whitman’s “Amorous Love,” attempting to incorporate, celebrate, and merge with the entire material world, is thus ultimately a mechanical expression. “The difference between life and matter,” Lawrence writes, “is that life, living things, living creatures, have the instinct of turning away from *some* matter.”¹⁶⁷ Whitman cannot turn away from *any* matter, and consequently becomes wholly material and machinic in the process. As “matter gravitates because it *is* helpless and mechanical,”¹⁶⁸ so too does he helplessly and without discernment gravitate toward matter, wholly absorbed as he is in an experience of materiality.

That the record of this experience privileges the visual and the visionary should not surprise us, for, like so many other visionary poets, Whitman confronts the reader-as-mechanic. In “Song of Myself” (1855) he sees and finds that “There is no stoppage, and never can be stoppage; [. . .] See ever so far . . . there is limitless space outside of that, / Count ever so much . . . there is limitless time around that.”¹⁶⁹ This immense vision, which attempts to take in material reality as a whole and to merge with it, fully aware that this is ultimately impossible (and its poetic expression no less so), is no less empirical and sensual in its operation. Infinity here is posited as an appropriate horizon for sensual experience and his poetic expression hence becomes the attempt to transcribe and archive this experience without end.

At first glance, Whitman’s vision appears to constitute a significant break with the visionary tradition of the past, for the material world here is not a play of appearances covering over the truth which can only be “seen through a glass darkly,”¹⁷⁰ nor an emanation masking the unity of a Plotinian One.¹⁷¹ The multiplicity of sensual experience contains within itself its own

transcendent and impossibly infinite truth, and as such, needs no immaterial foundation upon which to ground a visionary poetics. In this regard, his poetry evokes certain of the visionary elements found in William Blake, a poet who himself posed a significant break with the visionary tradition. Like Blake, Whitman absolutely privileges the body's sensual experience and believes that one need not posit a rift between the body and the soul to access eternity. In Blake's most famous eschatological vision

the whole creation will be consumed and appear infinite. and holy whereas it now appears finite and corrupt.

This will come to pass by an improvement of sensual enjoyment.

But first the notion that man has a body distinct from his soul, is to be expunged. .

. .

If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is: infinite.¹⁷²

Unlike Blake, however, the primacy of the body and empirical experience for Whitman does not depend upon a vision of the destruction of a fallen nature and its replacement by a New Jerusalem. Whitman's break with the visionary tradition comes through making nature *itself* a medium of revelation rather than a medium whose destruction is revelatory. The materiality of nature affords access to the infinite in sensual perception itself. Like Blake, Whitman can "see a World in a Grain of Sand / And Heaven in a Wild Flower / Hold infinity in the palm of your hand / And Eternity in an hour,"¹⁷³ but because this nature for Whitman is all there is, that it *cannot* be destroyed nor, if it could, would it reveal anything other than simply its mute and dumb and vital reality, he effectively creates what appears to be a non-eschatological vision. This is quite far from the Blakean Apocalypse according to Northrop Frye: "Vision is the end of

religion, and the destruction of the physical universe is the clearing of our own eyesight. Art, because it affords a systematic training in this kind of vision, is the medium through which religion is revealed. . . . And if all art is visionary, it must be apocalyptic and revelatory too: the artist does not wait to die before he lives in the spiritual world into which John [of Patmos] was caught up.”¹⁷⁴ In holding unflaggingly to a robust, malleable, and fluid sense of materiality, Whitman expunges religion from his visionary poetics, and consequently inaugurates an aesthetic apocalypticism at once mechanical and repetitive, all-the-while retaining a sense of revelation in that he celebrates being caught up in the midst of nature as an observer. In short, we can find in Whitman a non-religious apocalypse, a sense of an ending without anything beyond that end (except more life and repetition), which is an essential step in the emergence of the nuclear imagination, something that will be even more fully articulated in Williams.

Perhaps most importantly, Whitman’s vision is twofold; it is as catastrophic as it is celebratory. In its celebration of change and its foundation upon the transmutation of matter into life, it crystallizes a teleology of mechanical organization, life articulating itself again and again simply from the chaos of its own inherent generative capacity, concluding in the very dissolution of that force of articulation in death (that results in more life). For Lawrence this machinic poet was not only representative of a mechanical superhumanity, but also “a very great poet, of the end of life. A very great post-mortem poet, of the transitions of the soul as it loses its integrity. The poet of the soul’s last shout and shriek on the confines of death. *Après moi le déluge* [after me the Flood].”¹⁷⁵ Whitman as post-mortem poet is a result of his mechanization. The open road does indeed have a destination, and it is just as infinite, palpable, and material as any other destination for “The smallest sprout shows there is really no death, / And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it, / And ceas’d the moment life appear’d.”¹⁷⁶

The open road's destination is death, but since life for Whitman is a process without end, it constantly re-expresses itself by participating in a tautology: life's direction (through death) goes toward the production of more life. What oozes out of Whitman can be seen, quite simply, as a poet's material confrontation with death, and that experience is simultaneously and paradoxically a vision of an infinitely verdant nature. When Whitman, among his many ramblings, sees upon "entering by the suburbs some vast and ruined city . . . the blocks and fallen architecture more than all the living cities of the globe,"¹⁷⁷ these lines should be understood both as great portents of doom as well as relatively insignificant insights, appearing as they do quite unobtrusively amongst a host of other landscape features. This multiplication of ruins appears between a history "approaching some great battlefield in which we are soon to be engaged" and an absolutely free sense of sexual generation: "I am a free companion . . . I bivouac by invading watchfires, // I turn the bridegroom out of bed and stay with the bride myself, / And tighten her all night to my thighs and lips."¹⁷⁸ These ruins should be understood as elements of a generative material reality, of the machinic phylum itself, even as they approach an innumerable and abyssal multiplication in the slow dissolving march of history as it conducts its conversation amongst the ruins.

Whitman understands his role as witness and transcriber of the infinite landscape and roads that he "tread[s] day and night."¹⁷⁹ In attempting to capture the cosmic immensity of reality, he can leave behind nothing but an innumerable multitude of ruins, of text which cannot help but approach its own dissolution while rapaciously seizing the opportunity to multiply. Whitman's project, of attempting to merge his very self with the material world, understands that the limit of such an engagement is nothing less than the death of that self. Correspondingly, his formal attempt to produce a poetics adequate to sing this self, desiring a structure capable of

expressing the infinite nature of time and space as it is presented to the imagination, causes his textual machinery to constantly confront the finitude of its inscription, its own status as always already ruined. The anxious textual proliferation and accumulation of Whitman's text, the overflowing, hyperarchival urge, is the mark of his implicit awareness of its finitude.

Confronting this finitude causes him to write, to repetitively and encyclopedically write, in an attempt to absorb what he sees and maintain the scope of his vision. His poetry must *absorb*¹⁸⁰ to participate in eternity. Within the machinic scope of death the poems' absorptive urge produces an archive, an archive understood as always partial, contingent, selective, fragmentary, and ruined. As the imagination strides the open road, it attempts to capture and textually house all it sees.

To return again to Lawrence, he equates being mechanical with being superhuman. It is easy to see today why this might be the case. The post-apocalyptic tales in which a cyborg or machine carries the messianic burden are numerous, but to see this functioning in Whitman nearly twenty-eight years before Zarathustra announces his *Übermensch*¹⁸¹ is to catch a glimpse of an unmistakable teleological futurity for the human. Whether we see the genealogy of this superman resting upon a "human, all too human" sense of morality, or upon the rupture which was experienced by the European upon entering the verge of the "New World," perhaps matters little in the end. In Whitman we are greeted by the superhuman as a kind of robotic historian sitting in the present at the end of the open road, beyond which lies futurity itself.

Ahead of Whitman, nothing. Ahead of all poets, pioneering into the wilderness of unopened life, Whitman. Beyond him, none. His wide, strange camp at the end of the great high-road. And lots of new little poets camping on Whitman's camping ground now. But none going really beyond. Because Whitman's camp is at the end of the road,

on the edge of a great precipice. Over the precipice, blue distances and the blue hollow of the future. But there is no way down. It is a dead end.¹⁸²

For Lawrence, Whitman's superhumanity is essentially *liminal*, it defines the horizon of vision given to the poet's machinic imagination. In ascribing such a limit, Lawrence implicitly suggests something about the machinic imagination itself here, something that his death in 1930 prevented him from seeing directly, though there are inklings of it in *Apocalypse* (one of the last things he wrote before he died). Bemoaning the loss of cosmic vision granted to earlier Christian and pagan traditions, most notably articulated for him in John of Patmos's *Apocalypse*, he argues that for this cosmic worship the Protestants "substituted the non-vital universe of forces and mechanistic order, everything else became abstraction, and the long slow death of the human being set in. This slow death produced science and machinery, but both are death products."¹⁸³ In his chapter on Whitman in *Studies of Classic American Literature*, though made fairly explicit, the relationship between Whitman as post-mortem poet and his mechanicity largely remains merely suggested or open by the end.

Whitman's position at the end of the open road stops before an oceanic and horizonless abyss, an abyss of nuclear horror beyond which this imagination could not go. In equating the exponential march of science and machinery with death, Lawrence, through reading Whitman, clearly understands that even a superhumanity would be forced to contemplate its total annihilation if the logic of Whitman's imagination and engagement with the machinic phylum was carried to its inevitable end. For even this most mechanically superhuman of poets could not cross the unrepresentable, unimaginable gap of the nuclear. Though traces of the nuclear may be apparent in his work itself, more than anything else, the most clear nuclear trace lies in the fact that the material text itself is always already threatened by the very vision it attempts to project.

In attempting to see temporal and spatial infinity, the finitude of his text, of his superhuman project, confronts a central and unsurpassable paradox. Whitman has “heard what the talkers were talking, the talk of the beginning and the end, / But [he] do[es] not talk of the beginning or the end.”¹⁸⁴ He cannot talk of the beginning or the end, quite simply, because his vision does not permit him to do so. He can absorb, record, write, massively accumulate, encyclopedically list—in short, he can attempt to archive material reality itself, but this archive’s limit and contingency in the face of the nuclear referent everywhere marks Whitman’s relationship to the future. The futurity of the nuclear, that it is always “to come,” is the end of the open road, a space where American literature itself camps along with Whitman and where William Carlos Williams arrives.

2.4 APOCALYPSE ON REPEAT: WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS’S *SPRING AND ALL* AND THE NUCLEAR IMAGINATION

*O Russia! Russians! come with me into
my dream and let us be lovers,
connoisseurs, idlers—Come with me
in the spirit of Walt Whitman’s earliest
poem, let us loaf at our ease—a moment
at the edge of destruction.*

—William Carlos Williams, “Russia”¹⁸⁵

The IMAGINATION then I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*¹⁸⁶

In effect, difference ceases to be reflexive and recovers an effectively real concept only to the extent that it designates catastrophes: either breaks of continuity in the series of resemblances or impassable fissures between the analogical structures. It ceases to be reflexive only in order to become catastrophic. No doubt it cannot be the one without the other. But does not difference as catastrophe precisely bear witness to an irreducible ground which continues to act under the apparent equilibrium of organic representation?

—Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*¹⁸⁷

In the preface to a volume of William Carlos Williams's collected poetry published in 1934, Wallace Stevens claims that "[t]here are so many things to say about him. The first is that he is a romantic poet. This will horrify him. Yet the proof is everywhere."¹⁸⁸ A few years later, in a short review of a subsequent volume of collected poetry, poet and critic Yvor Winters states that

“Williams, in his view of life and of poetry, is an uncompromising romantic. He believes in the surrender to feeling and to instinct as the only way to wisdom and art.”¹⁸⁹ Stevens and Winters, however, mean two different things by calling Williams a romantic. For Stevens, Williams’s romanticism resides in his rejection of “the accepted sense of things. In that, most of all, his romantic temperament appears. But it is not enough to reject: what matters is the reason for rejection. The reason is that Williams has a romantic of his own.”¹⁹⁰ Winters takes a different approach by emphasizing Williams’s famous phrase, “no ideas but in things”¹⁹¹: “His poetry therefore concentrates on the concrete; the only ideas which it occasionally expresses are those which I have outlined, and since the ideas are bad, the poetry is best when Dr. Williams follows his favorite formula and eschews ideas altogether.”¹⁹² Williams’s romanticism manifests itself, if we take both Winters and Stevens at their word, as simultaneously a rejection of and a surrender to things. For Stevens, his romanticism resides in his iconoclasm; for Winters, “the romantic principles which have governed Dr. Williams’[s] work have limited his scope.”¹⁹³ Between Stevens and Winters’s assessment, we might slightly bastardize their statements and say that his “romanticism” simultaneously displays a deconstructive and phenomenological impulse, a desire to break apart and reconstruct the objects of his poetic contemplation, while limiting his poetic scope through surrendering to the materiality of things.

Of course, with such a wide definition of Williams’s “romanticism,” a poet that at this late date we would have an understandably difficult time calling “romantic” without considerable qualification, it perhaps behooves me to offer a different definition of romanticism than either Stevens or Winters provide. For Stevens goes on to make the strange assertion that Williams’s romanticism is a result of the fact that “[a]ll poets are, to some extent, romantic poets. Thus, the poet who least supposes himself to be so is often altogether so.”¹⁹⁴ Though Stevens is ultimately

intent on making a fairly interesting and germane point about Williams—that he is a “realist struggling to escape from the serpents of the unreal”¹⁹⁵—the large breadth and scope of how his understanding of the term “romantic” here might be applied to Dr. Williams’s work threatens to make the term meaningless. For this reason, I turn to M.H. Abrams’s seminal study of romanticism, *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971), not only because Abrams’s book provides many of the terms about the relationship between apocalyptic structures and the imagination in the discussion that will follow, but also because he provides a historical definition of romanticism: “The Romantic enterprise was an attempt to sustain inherited cultural order against what to many writers seemed the imminence of chaos; and the resolve to give up what one was convinced one had to give up of the dogmatic understructure of Christianity, yet to save what one could save of its experiential relevance and values, may surely be viewed by the disinterested historian as a display of integrity and courage.”¹⁹⁶

Though there are any number of ways one might qualify or revise Abrams’s formulation of romanticism, it begins to make clear some of the problems in calling Williams a “romantic.” His thorough and lifelong rejection of Christianity and the supernatural can clearly be seen not in a resolve “to save what one could of [Christianity’s] experiential relevance,” but in his famous demand to “Say it! No ideas but in things.”¹⁹⁷ In his own words, and much like Walt Whitman, Williams wanted to conceive of the experimental work he was doing in *Kora in Hell: Improvisations* (1920) and afterward as breaking with the past by creating a new and particularly American idiom that attempts to inhabit the unimpeachable materiality of the present, and to look toward imaginative forms capable of carrying forward this approach into the future. Remembering the appearance of T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1915)

when he was at work on the “Prologue” to *Kora in Hell*,¹⁹⁸ Williams later recalled in a conversation that,

I had the violent feeling that [T.S.] Eliot had betrayed what I believed in. He was looking backward; I was looking forward. He was a conformist, with wit, learning which I did not possess. He knew French, Latin, Arabic, god knows what. I was interested in that. But I felt he had rejected America and I refused to be rejected and so my reaction was violent. I realized the responsibility I must accept. I knew he would influence all subsequent American poets and take them out of my sphere. I had envisaged a new form of poetic composition, a *form for the future*. It was a shock to me that he was so tremendously successful; my contemporaries flocked to him—away from what I wanted. It forced me to be successful.¹⁹⁹

In contradistinction to Stevens’s assessment of Williams as romantic because of his rejection of “the accepted sense of things,” Williams’s violent reaction to “Prufrock” occurs because of what he views as Eliot’s rejection of America and the present in favor of (a conservative view of) the European past. Though this is obviously not to suggest that the presence of the tradition does not appear in Williams’s own work—*Kora in Hell* takes its title from Greek mythology, he immediately mentions after his words above that he “was proud to be associated with the writers of the past,”²⁰⁰ and, as Kenneth Burke puts it, “Williams knows Walt Whitman’s smile down to the last wrinkle”²⁰¹—it makes it very difficult to call Williams “romantic” if we (even tentatively) accept Abrams’s definition of romanticism²⁰² (to say nothing of the conflict between Stevens and Winters’s discussion of his romanticism).

I begin my discussion of Williams around the difficulties of assessing his romantic tendencies not because I think it really matters whether we call him romantic or not, and surely

one can find elements of romanticism in many of the notable modernists, but rather because this term immediately draws me into a discussion of how his untimely poetic project regards the past, present, and future in a manner that begins by acknowledging the difficulty of locating Williams in literary history, a difficulty that even his contemporaries had, as evidenced by the conflicting accounts of his “romanticism” from Winters and Stevens. Further, Williams is a poet with a number of poetic genealogies that clearly revolve in a romantic orbit, of which I would like to focus on two.

First among these is the enduring influence of Whitman on Williams’s work and thinking. Other than Hart Crane, for whom Whitman served as “*Panis Angelicus*”²⁰³ or “heavenly bread” throughout *The Bridge* (1930) and elsewhere, Williams is one of the most visible modern inheritors of Whitman’s distinctly American project. As Williams wrote in 1950:

Whitman—not gone—
not at the end of his rope
—that’s jewel weed out there not lamb’s quarters

Let’s say we’ve a little unraveled
the end of the rope
and go on from there. Walt, Ben
See you again Some day²⁰⁴

Even well after the early experimental works of *Kora and Hell*, *Spring and All* (1923), and *The Great American Novel* (1923), Whitman’s voice had still not reached the end of its open road and was “not gone”; he was still very much present for Williams, and the project begun in “Song of Myself” could be carried forward by unraveling “the end of the rope.” And I probably do not

need to belabor Whitman's influence overmuch, as whether in Williams's own words or in those of his critics, the impact Whitman has on Williams's career has long been evident.²⁰⁵ (Nor is this the venue to pursue Whitman's own "romanticism," a poet who, especially later in life, had a very complicated and oftentimes obscure relationship to the supernatural.) The coincidence of Lawrence publishing his *Studies in Classic American Literature* in the same year that *Spring and All* appeared, the self-avowed machinic quality of his poetry—"There's nothing sentimental about a machine, and: A poem is a small (or large) machine made of words"²⁰⁶—and the endeavor to make poetry speak in the language of everyday life makes Whitman a clear precursor in many ways, but most evidently in terms of Williams's own inability to talk about a beginning or end.

Second, one of the most enduring pursuits of Williams's long career was his continual refinement of his understanding of that quite romantic concern: the imagination. As he asks himself in *Spring and All*, "To whom then am I addressed?" his answer is clear: "To the imagination."²⁰⁷ This overarching concern with the imagination, both as generative and as an addressee of his art gives Williams his romantic coloring, especially in terms of the explicitly apocalyptic manner in which he inaugurates his engagement with the imagination in *Spring and All*. As Abrams writes about the romantic transformation of the apocalypse:

To put the matter with the sharpness of drastic simplification: faith in an apocalypse by revelation had been replaced by faith in an apocalypse by revolution, and this now gave way to faith in an apocalypse by imagination or cognition. In the ruling two-term frame of Romantic thought, the mind of man confronts the old heaven and earth and possesses within itself the power, if it will but recognize and avail itself of the power, to transform them into a new heaven and a new earth, by means of a total revolution of consciousness.

This, as we know, is the high Romantic argument, and it is no accident that it took shape during the age of revolutions.²⁰⁸

It is tempting to suggest that Williams has a similar “high romantic argument” in his experimental work from the early 1920s, in which his sense of the imagination, at least as it is articulated in *Spring and All*, wants to transform the world. What transpires in *Spring and All*, however, is something that I would like to argue is a formation of the imagination that, though it takes place in clearly apocalyptic terms, represents a significant departure from the romantic notion of the imagination, even if it is in many ways obviously indebted to that sense of the imagination. Distinguishing Williams’s notion of the imagination from the romantic, apocalyptic imagination is paramount for my thinking throughout this dissertation, and Williams’s articulation of the imagination in *Spring and All* best captures what I mean by *nuclear imagination*.

Williams begins *Spring and All*’s curious mix of hyperbolic (theoretical) prose and contrastingly understated poetry by revising and inverting Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s notion of the primary and secondary imagination from his *Biographia Literaria* (1817) that provides the epigraph for this section of Chapter 2. Rather than consider the imagination as the human manifestation of the divine act of creation, the “repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM,” Williams removes the romantic sense of eternity and the infinite, and limits his scope to a highly rigorous sense of the imagination as something intent upon understanding a contingent present—“this moment is the only thing in which I am at all interested.”²⁰⁹ He writes: “And if when I pompously announce that I am addressed—To the imagination—you believe that I thus divorce myself *from life* and so defeat my own end, I reply: To refine, to clarify, to intensify that eternal *moment* in which *we alone live* there is but a single

force—the imagination. This is its book. I myself invite you to read and to see.”²¹⁰ Though he retains Coleridge’s romantic sense of the imagination as a “living Power” here, calling it a “force” places it more firmly in Adams’s distinctly materialist understanding of force in *The Education*. The “eternal moment,” the ungraspable now, the reality and materiality of conscious existence is for Williams the subject of the imagination’s activity, and it is an activity firmly grounded in the organic rather than the supernatural, the ontic rather than the eternal.

Like the Whitman who begins “Song of Myself” with the invocation that “every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you,”²¹¹ Williams also makes clear to say that “Whenever I say ‘I’ I mean also ‘you.’ And so, together, we shall begin.”²¹² For Williams, the invitation “to read and to see” his book of the imagination is fundamentally dialogical, an understanding of the imagination that arises not through the channeling of some supernatural Other, nor as an expression or manifestation of the poet’s transcendental self or his genius, but through a conversation in which self and other become blurred and, in a clearly Whitmanian image, become “locked in a fraternal embrace, the classic caress of author and reader.”²¹³ Williams’s language and sense of the imagination begin by having, in the words of Mikhail Bakhtin, “a potential dialogue [. . .] embedded in them, one as yet unfolded, a concentrated dialogue of two voices, two world views, two languages,”²¹⁴ from which the myth of a unitary, originary, singular voice—the “I AM” of the transcendental *logos*—is foreclosed by a dialogical poetics of heteroglossia and multivocality. In this, Williams’s poetics, by addressing the imagination, but also “you”—who is also “I”—acknowledges an imagination that is multiple and fundamentally social. (As J. Hillis Miller notes, for Williams “[a] private language is no language, for the essence of language is its use as a means of communication.”²¹⁵)

Further, Williams's sense of the imagination as it is formulated in *Spring and All* is not initially generative or creative, as in Coleridge's formulation, but rather emerges from phenomenological encounter. The imagination refines, clarifies, and intensifies reality. In this, Williams shares with "the Romantic poet [his dependence] on his mind as it engages with the world in the act of perceiving,"²¹⁶ but rather than denigrate the "'bodily,' 'physical,' 'vegetable,' 'corporeal,' or 'outward eye,' which results in a slavery of the mind to merely material objects, a spiritual sleep of death and a sensual death-in-life,"²¹⁷ for Williams the bodily and corporeal perception of the world is, as it is for Whitman, not only sufficient, but the very thing the imagination strives after—no ideas but in things. Rather than the Romantic opposition to the gross material reality of things in favor of "the liberated, creative, and resurrective mode of sight [. . .] by means of [. . .] 'the imagination'" that achieves "freshness of sensation, 'moments' of illumination, and visual transvaluations,"²¹⁸ Williams sees this "redemptive" goal of the imagination as mere fantasy. He says this more-or-less emphatically: "nearly all writing, up to the present, if not all art [. . .] has always been a search for 'the beautiful illusion.' Very well. I am not in search of 'the beautiful illusion.'" ²¹⁹ Rather, responding to an invented critic who considers Williams's poetry "antipoetry. It is the annihilation of life upon which [he] is bent," Williams mock-seriously takes up an antipoetic imaginary intent on annihilation far beyond the scope of simply accomplishing the "death of poetry" that the "moderns!" are intent upon.²²⁰

To begin the work of the imagination, and to begin addressing the imagination, Williams begins with a vastly expanded version of Coleridge's notion of the secondary imagination that "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead." Williams, however, is not content to

merely dissolve, diffuse, and dissipate the objects of his poetic contemplation in order to re-create and reconstruct them through a vital process working upon objects essentially fixed and dead (objects that for Williams are *never* fixed and dead). He goes much, much further here, to the point where the secondary imagination, the imagination that Coleridge calls different in degree rather than kind from the primary imagination, is bounded only by the limits of what it is capable of destroying. If the primary imagination for Coleridge is the “living Power and prime Agent,” in the opening of *Spring and All* the prime agent of the imagination is its destructive capacities, and the power of the imagination rests upon its ability *to annihilate all life on earth*.

Spring and All is striking in the scope of its destruction and the depth of its irony. For Williams, the power of the imagination in the opening pages of this curious little book resides in nothing less than its capacity to project absolute destruction brought about through a distinctly (and strangely) national project. Further, he introduces this apocalyptic scope by implicating the kind of gross sentiment often associated with more pedestrian versions of romanticism that would argue for a harmonious accord between the human, the cosmic, and the national: “imagine the New World [. . .] in all its prismatic colorings, its counterpart in our souls—our souls that are great pianos whose strings, of honey and of steel, the divisions of the rainbow set twanging, loosing on the air great novels of adventure!”²²¹ Rather than pausing for even a moment on the harmonious vibrations between the supernatural (“our souls”), aesthetic, and material spheres, vibrations both of sound and of light that result in “great novels of adventure,” he invites us to imagine a very different sort of New World in the very next sentence that cannot but resonate with the destructive horrors of the Great War recently concluded: “Imagine the monster project of the *moment*: Tomorrow we the people of the United State are going to Europe armed to kill every man, woman, and child in the area west of the Carpathian Mountains (also east) sparing

none.”²²² The lack of commentary or transition between an overwrought sentimentality and American bloodlust intent on genocidal destruction can hardly be called “romantic” here. Any of the more reassuring capacities for the imagination to create a “beautiful illusion,” or provide aesthetic meaning, or to transform a “discrete, dead, and alien milieu into a human, integral, and companionable milieu in which man finds himself thoroughly at home,”²²³ are not even paused over—not even to say that these modes or expressions of the imagination are insufficient—before we are urged to “Kill! kill! the English, the Irish, the French, the Germans, the Italians and the rest: friends or enemies, it makes no difference, kill them all.”²²⁴

The sheer hyperbole of Williams’s discourse over the following pages makes it difficult to take him seriously as actually providing what he initially promised: that *Spring and All* is the imagination’s book, and that we are receiving—even filtered through his art—some sort of “theory” of the imagination. But he simultaneously is refusing to offer some reassuring alternative to this sense of the imagination at this point. The power of the imagination resides *precisely* in its ability to invent newer and newer modes of destruction, to the point that even love—either in the sense of *eros* or *caritas*—is merely in the service of destructive horror: “Because we love them—all. That is the secret: a new sort of murder.”²²⁵ Williams is doing more here than simply condemning the invocation of Christian eschatology as the revelation of God’s love as absurd, that we need to imagine the destruction of the world to access love; he is foreclosing the apocalyptic as a means toward the (loving) redemption of history altogether. As Bruce Comens so nicely puts it:

Williams imagines the apocalypse not in order to hasten an actual apocalypse, but to disrupt and so free us from apocalyptic, or strategic, patterns of thought and culture—those patterns that had already led to World War I and that, with continued technological

progress, could clearly lead to an actual, man-made apocalypse, a “self-inflicted holocaust.” Already in the 1920s, Williams sensed that he was living in a world where such an end could come all too true.²²⁶

For Williams the imagination is not a means to the divine or supernatural, nor is it primarily creative in the opening pages of *Spring and All*. Rather, we enter into a realm in which the imagination is still an operative term, a force, a human capacity, a vessel for literary production. Its ability to create or generate any meaning, and humanity’s capacity to destroy itself through the imagination have nearly subsumed Coleridge’s primary, generative, creative imagination. A space redeemed by this imagination has fallen away.

Consequently, Williams’s articulation of the imagination is positively Pynchonian in the recursivity of its irony at this point of the book. It achieves whatever it can achieve by inversion, destruction, dissolution, violence, parody, sarcasm, hyperbole. There is no stable ground upon which it rests, but rather works as an abyssal force, arising from nowhere other than a destructive (rather than procreative) urge.

The imagination, intoxicated by prohibitions, rises to drunken heights to destroy the world. Let it rage, let it kill. The imagination is supreme. To it all our works forever, from the remotest past to the farthest future, have been, are and will be dedicated. To it alone we show our wit by having raised in its honor as monument not the least pebble. To it now we come to dedicate our secret project: The annihilation of every human creature on the face of the earth. This is something never before attempted. None to remain; nothing but the lower vertebrates, the mollusks, the insects and plants. Then at last will the world be made anew. Houses crumble to ruin, cities disappear giving place to mounds of soil blown thither by the winds, small bushes and grass give way to trees which grow old and

are succeeded by other trees for countless generations. A marvelous serenity broken only by bird and wild beast calls reigns over the entire sphere. Order and peace abound.²²⁷

What is to be done with such complete destruction? Why such a genocidal “secret project”? Such entropic dissolution? And the quasi-reassuring sense that “order and peace abound”?

There are a few different yet complimentary ways of reading Williams’s thanoptic urge here, all of which I think are not only accurate, but if my goals here are to demonstrate that *Spring and All* captures an emergent nuclear imagination and to provide as complex a definition of my understanding of this (nuclear) imagination as possible, it is necessary to consider these different interpretations of Williams’s destructive imagination concurrently.

The first reading of this imagination drunk on its own potential for destruction would suggest that here is Williams’s most vitriolic critique of modernity (as Comens does). It is impossible to look at the world of 1923 and not see that the most visible and powerful recent manifestations of the human imagination were not poems—even following the heady (literary) year of 1922—but rather tanks, airplanes, bombs, machine guns, mustard gas, etc. (Manuel De Landa’s robotic historian would surely concur with this statement.) In this way, Williams is quite clear in his parodic anti-apocalypse. The project of the imagination is mechanical annihilation without revelation or meaning. Any assessment of the imagination that follows in *Spring and All* must be understood as secondary to this potential for humanity to destroy itself through its (supposed) technological mastery over the material world.²²⁸

Further, suggesting that this looks like a particularly *nuclear* sense of the imagination, a sense quite concomitant with the Cold War fantasy of Mutually Assured Destruction should be clear. At its most simple, if I am suggesting that Williams articulates and engages with a nuclear imagination, this reading must emphasize how the fantasy of MAD is prefigured here, even to go

so far as to implicitly suggest that it is *only* something Williams and ourselves can imagine; this sense of species destruction cannot be experienced, “it has existence only by means of what is said of it and only where it is talked about. Some might call it a fable, then, a pure invention [. . .]. Who can swear that our unconscious is not expecting this? Dreaming of it? Desiring it?”²²⁹

Long before such destruction becomes possible, Williams is consciously dreaming it, consciously talking about it, consciously writing it, consciously imagining it (in a fashion that may very well be unprecedented). He is fully participating in the nuclear national fantasy of MAD over twenty years before Hiroshima. He is prefiguring the Cold War by imagining Russia as a particular object of the genocidal US “project of the moment”: “For the Russians we shall build a bridge from edge to edge of the Atlantic [. . .]. The bridge is to be blown up when all of Russia is upon it.”²³⁰ And he imagines this species-wide destruction, unlike H.G. Wells in *World Set Free*, without referencing a specific technology for how one would accomplish this horrifying vision. He also does not need recourse to thermodynamics and a theory of entropy. He only needs the imagination in its modern project of the moment to see: “Now, in the imagination, all flesh, all human flesh has been dead upon the earth for ten million, billion years.”²³¹ And ultimately, it is because “[t]he imagination uses the phraseology of science. It attacks, stirs, animates, *is radio-active* in all that can be touched by action.”²³²

To persist along with Winters or Stevens (or indeed many others) in tracing Williams’s poetic genealogy from romanticism in light of what is an imaginary clearly participating in a sense of eschatology that (in retrospect) is thoroughly and almost shockingly nuclear, is to mistake Williams’s “resistance” and his “surrender” to things, to objects, with what is, in certain distinct ways, a *new* imaginary—“quietly and without fanfare, a revolution in human sensibility.”²³³ Williams owes a great deal to the romantics and to Coleridge’s notion of the

imagination, to the point that we might read his mock-gratitude—"Thank you, I know well what I am plagiarizing"²³⁴—as a nod toward the romantic. And I further think that without firmly grounding my discussion in at least some history of how poets have understood the imagination and the persistence of apocalyptic structures through which it is articulated not only in supernatural eschatologies, but in eschatologies that display what Abrams following Carlyle calls "natural supernaturalism," would do a great disservice to Williams's own complex sense of an ending.²³⁵ But the horrifying scope of his vision in which no redemption whatsoever is offered, appears to me not only distinctly *modern*—and without modernism's held-out hope that aesthetics still might redeem mankind (without supernaturalism)—but as J. Hillis Miller claims in his influential reading of Williams "as a post-metaphysical 'poet of reality,' indeed as someone who actually broke through into an original sense of immanence,"²³⁶ Williams's "resignation to existence, a despair' [. . .] puts him beyond romanticism."²³⁷ Nor do I want to simply conflate this despair with a modern sense of alienation, nor some kind of *Angst*, nor existential crisis, nor mere *ennui*. Williams's despair in *Spring and All* manifests as the imagination's realization and fulfillment of the *finitude of the species*, not the individual subject, the transcendental genius contemplating his dissolution and death, the fragility of human institutions, etc. Surely Williams does not originate such a despair over human finitude in this kind of cosmic sense,²³⁸ but his emphasis on the human, all too human power of the imagination to bring such destruction about, in the wake of the nuclear age and the waning of the Cold War, must be looked back upon at this late date as a vital and uncanny early expression of the nuclear imagination and its attendant fantasy of MAD. If there is something new in Williams's imaginary, it is precisely this: a deep sense of the imagination with none of its traditionally redemptive and positive powers; and to risk oversimplification, Williams's imagination in the

opening of *Spring and All* is different from Coleridge's primary imagination in *kind* rather than just degree. This is not an imagination grounded in some past archetype like Oppenheimer's Hindu-vision, nor is it "uninteresting" in the sense that Stein understands the bomb (it is almost too interesting, and will shortly be generative as well). Williams's imagination is emergent, new, destructive, powerful, horrific, and radioactive; it is, quite simply, nuclear.

A second way of reading Williams's supremely destructive imagination would suggest that what follows in *Spring and All* truly *is* the imagination's book, and that he must first clear the ground of our preconceived ideas about the immateriality of the imagination—or Coleridge's supernatural primary imagination and its redemptive powers—before he may consider that "the imagination is an actual force comparable to electricity or steam, it is not a plaything but a power that has been used from the first to raise the understanding of—it is, not necessary to resort to mysticism [. . .]. The value of the imagination to the writer consists in its ability to make words. Its unique power is to give created forms reality, actual existence."²³⁹ Williams's destructive fantasy that opens *Spring and All*, in this second sense, works by emphasizing the materiality and reality of the imagination through its ability to destroy. That is, since it is not only able to destroy, but we can imagine an immense US national project bent upon the eradication of the species, we must acknowledge that the imagination is real, all-too-real—a rhetorical move that subsequent history surely justifies Williams for making here. The reading of this moment of species-annihilation as serving to emphasize the *materiality* and *reality* of the imagination as a force is also vital for my understanding of the nuclear imagination for a number of reasons, but principally among them the fact that nuclear destruction is not "like" something else, it is not metaphorical—"There is not life in the stuff because it tries to be 'like' life"²⁴⁰—it is *real*, even if it is only real through "what is said of it and only where it is talked about." The emphasis on

the materiality of the imagination, and simultaneously the imagination's effect on the material must be emphasized here, for it offers nuclear criticism a significant, albeit unintentional initial salvo into whether the nuclear is "fabulously textual" or whether it is altogether too real. Here, even at this early date, it is always already *both*. If Williams's sense of the imagination is to resonate in any way as *Spring and All* progresses, it must be read as a material force, *and* as something thoroughly textual and literary.

A third reading of the imagination's destruction of the world in the opening pages of *Spring and All* must emphasize Williams's irony. My two previous readings of this moment have taken Williams *quite* seriously indeed, but obviously his thanoptic hyperbole is meant to be read humorously. If, as his imagined critic suggests, his poetry is "anti-poetry," and he is bent upon "the annihilation of life," then Williams is more than willing to oblige and satisfy the opinion of such a critic. "Okay," he seems to be saying, "if my poetry is so bent upon the destruction of life, at least I will make it explicitly, violently, and extremely so." Even at its most genocidal, however, when love becomes "a new sort of murder," Williams remains playful with his imaginary destruction, murdering only so that "We [can] make leberwurst of them. Bratwurst."²⁴¹ Further, his humor here does not limit itself to simply small jokes about food, but sets its sights on the Christian apocalyptic itself through a digestive and gustatory irony that is, at least to my knowledge, without equal:

This final and self inflicted holocaust has been all for love, for sweetest love, that together the human race, yellow, black, brown, red and white, agglutinated into one enormous soul may be gratified with the sight and retire to the heaven of heavens content to rest on its laurels. There, soul of souls, watching its own horrid unity, it boils and digests within itself the tissues of the great Being of Eternity that we shall then have

become. With what magnificent explosions and odors will not the day be accomplished as we, the Great One among all creatures, shall go about contemplating our self-prohibited desires as we promenade them before the inward review of our bowels—et cetera, et cetera, et cetera . . . ²⁴²

It is difficult to gauge precisely how seriously to take Williams here, if at all. He is obviously quite emphatic and serious about his critique of a certain notion of the Christian afterlife, as here it is a ludicrous “agglutination” of humans—even if this amassing appears egalitarian or “democratic” (or even “Whitmanian”)—into “one enormous soul,” a heavenly melting pot that “boils and digests . . . the great Being of Eternity.” He could not be less celestial or heavenly though, as he is clearly describing a kind of divine flatulence of “magnificent explosions and odors” that accompanies this vision of the afterlife, a congealed soul with nothing left to do but review its own bowels. And with the repetition of “et cetera,” Williams implies that this soul has nothing to do for the rest of eternity but engage in a kind of endless scatological navel-gazing. What, with the deep seriousness of his eschatological vision birthed from an experience of the horrors of modernity, and the essential ground clearing it enacts in order to arrive at an articulation of his unique sense of the imagination, are we to do with such unholy and scatological irony?

I think the point to stress here is actually quite simple, and it is one that will bear out as the dissertation continues to confront irony in its subsequent chapters. Basically, Williams’s irony here is *recursive*—it continually upsets any stable meaning, reversing and turning in on itself in a vicious circle. On the one hand, we are encouraged to take Williams’s critique and disdain for Christian eschatology very seriously. We are also encouraged to take seriously Williams’s response to his contemporary critics that in articulating his imagination, he *does*

arrive at a sense of poetry capable of producing such poems as “By the Road to the Contagious Hospital” and “The Red Wheel Barrow,” among the many other fine poems in the book. And of course I think we are also encouraged to take the eschatological section of *Spring and All* seriously in the ways I have endeavored to above—as an important articulation of Williams’s sense of the imagination and as an imaginary firmly grounded in the material and real. But as the ground of this imaginary is here abyssal, and it works through destruction and dissolution, through extermination and eradication, it must also be fundamentally ironic. To engage with the kind of imagination Williams is constructing and enacting, one cannot escape irony, and not only can one not escape it, irony in such an imaginary is recursive and relentless in its ability to deconstruct any stable ground upon which to build anything.²⁴³ And indeed, for an imaginary that posits the extinction of the species at one horizon of its possibility, such irony is unavoidable if a text revolves within a nuclear sphere. This has caused Comens to say that Williams “struggled through much of his career to become a *post*-apocalyptic poet,”²⁴⁴ but I think this is wrong. The prevalence of post-apocalyptic American literature in the postwar era speaks more to the recursivity of the nuclear imagination—it imagines destruction repeatedly, over and over again, never satisfying itself with any limit to its ability to turn the world on its head in whatever way it can—than it speaks to some way *out* of apocalyptic structures and projections. Williams, through embracing this destructive, recursive, ironic, nuclear imagination abandons an eschatology that could in any way be positive, even as something to be gone “beyond,” to be gotten “post-” (please excuse the pun). In this way, Williams is neither an apocalyptic *nor* a post-apocalyptic poet, but a thoroughly nuclear one. For Comens, Williams resides on the boundary between modernism and postmodernism, between a poetics of strategy and a poetics of tactics, falling onto either side in a number of ways. And indeed, his career itself is quite neatly divided

by the Second World War. But if we for a brief moment dispense with such an untimely reading of Williams, the capacity of *Spring and All* to be simultaneously deeply serious *and* deeply ironic signals the fullness of his achievement in articulating an imagination commensurate with the first nuclear age.

The final reading I will offer of Williams's eschatological projection turns on what it is capable of generating, returning us not to a version of Coleridge's primary imagination, but to a version of the imagination in which it is neither principally mimetic nor principally expressive, but is "a force, an electricity or a medium, a place."²⁴⁵ After having "the imagination flying above the wreck of ten thousand million souls,"²⁴⁶ the earth depopulated for "ten million, billion years," with as little fanfare and foreshadowing as the initial destruction received, bursting all at once out of "the monster project of the moment" Williams exclaims that

It is spring! but miracle of miracles a miraculous miracle has gradually taken place during these seemingly wasted eons. Through the orderly sequences of unmentionable time
EVOLUTION HAS REPEATED ITSELF FROM THE BEGINNING.

Good God!

Every step once taken in the first advance of the human race, from the amoeba to the highest type of intelligence, has been duplicated, every step exactly paralleling the one that preceded in the dead ages gone by. A perfect plagiarism results. Everything is and is new. Only the imagination is undeceived.²⁴⁷

There are a number of things that are unsurprising about this "miraculous miracle" of a total repetition of earthly life. First, the persistent and exuberant invocation of spring throughout Williams's work should prepare us here and elsewhere for the generative power he usually ascribes to organic life in its infinite capacity to return, rejuvenate, and regenerate. (For example,

the first lines of *Sour Grapes* [1921], the collection of poems that appeared just prior to *Spring and All*, are: “Here it is spring *again* / and I still a young man!”²⁴⁸) Second, Williams has a notion of time here that shares much with Friedrich Nietzsche’s notion of the eternal return, as well as other romantic theories of historical development in which history is repetitive and cyclical.²⁴⁹ Third, there is a clear echo of particular moments in “Song of Myself” here, particularly the moment when Whitman declares: “There is no stoppage, and never can be stoppage; / If I and you and the worlds and all beneath or upon their surface, and all the palpable life, were this moment reduced back to a pallid float, it would not avail in the long run, / We should surely bring up again where we now stand, / And as surely go much farther, and then farther and farther.”²⁵⁰ If anything, this moment in Williams is actually less ecstatic than Whitman’s declaration that even if everything disappeared on the earth, it would return just as it was, for Whitman goes on to make the horizon of his poetic vision recede into infinity: “A few quadrillions of eras, a few octillions of cubic leagues, do not hazard the span, or make it impatient, / They are but parts . . . any thing is but a part. // See ever so far . . . there is limitless space outside that, / Count ever so much . . . there is limitless time around that.”²⁵¹

Fourth, even with the clear antecedent of Whitman, Williams maintains the irony he has established over the previous pages through his repetition of the “miraculous” nature of this organic repetition. But as we are encouraged to simultaneously take his eschatological imaginary quite seriously, so too can we read this “miraculous miracle” sincerely, for given Williams’s sense of materiality, life itself must be considered a miracle, so the repetition of evolution after the self-inflicted holocaust must be miraculous as well. As Gilles Deleuze notes in *Difference and Repetition* (1968): “If repetition is possible, it is due to miracle rather than to law,” further adding that “repetition belongs to humor and irony; it is by nature transgression or exception.”²⁵²

Lastly, Williams here is very much in a space that follows from my above reading of Whitman. Evolution repeating from the beginning, occurring through no other force than the “orderly sequence of unmentionable time” is a clear formulation of material emergence, even if Williams’s thinking predates cybernetic and physical theories of emergence by a few decades. This moment shows Williams fully inhabiting and engaging with the machinic phylum. And though each of the above points is worthwhile to pursue for a number of different reasons, as this section concludes I will focus on these final two Deleuzian points as they regard Williams’s notion of the imagination as it gets further articulated in *Spring and All*.

Williams’s consideration of the imagination turns on this moment of cosmic, evolutionary, planetary repetition, a repetition that, in laying the groundwork for the appearance of the much more understated and subtle poetry of *Spring and All* ripping free of his initially eschatologically hyperbolic prose, must be also read as *difference*. There are a number of layers of repetition here, each subtly different from the last. Though probably impossible to find an “original” layer of repetition amongst the intricate meshwork of the book, one of the first repetitions that suggests itself is how Whitman’s mechanicity and his repetitive line quickly gets repeated in Williams’s invocation of Whitman’s concept of cosmic repetition as quoted above. Repeating this, Williams’s invokes evolution—a concept Whitman would not have had access to in 1855, four years before the publication of Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of the Species* (1859)—as the driving force of this repetition, evolution of course being in itself the production of difference through repetition. Further, this evolutionary repetition occurs through no outside forces intervening; in the manner Williams frames it, it is an emergent phenomenon, a consequence of the organization of matter into higher levels of order, a phenomenon of the machinic phylum. Following this, Williams emphasizes that even though “a perfect plagiarism”

results from this repetition—invoking a textual or literary repetition as well—there is still something not only different in this second emergence of the human, but *new*: “In fact now, for the first time, everything IS new.”²⁵³ And it is through this repetition that Williams grants access not only to the present, but to the future: “in that colossal surge toward the finite and the capable life has now arrived for the second time at that exact moment when in the ages past the destruction of the species *Homo sapiens* occurred.”²⁵⁴ By imagining the repetition of human history right up until the nuclear moment he previously imagined eradicating that very history, Williams opens up a sense of temporality that does not talk about the beginning or the end, not because it cannot transgress a nuclear limit, like Whitman, but because it has already incorporated a fully nuclear eschatology into its sense of reality. And at the upper limit of the proliferating repetitions here, we have Williams’s refined sense of mimesis: “Now at last the process of miraculous verisimilitude, that great copying which evolution has followed, repeating move for move every move that it made in the past—is approaching the end. [. . .] Suddenly it is at an end. THE WORLD IS NEW.”²⁵⁵ Thus ends the five odd pages of prose that opens *Spring and All*, after which the book begins in earnest with its first poem, “On the Road to the Contagious Hospital,” which repeats the movement of the initial prose section from wasteland to spring dawning, though in a highly condensed, less fantastic form.

Not only can we see Williams anticipating the post-apocalyptic narratives of the twentieth century in which civilization restarts after some catastrophe—indeed there is a sense of the human here that very much resembles, for example, Walter M. Miller Jr.’s *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959) and its construction of a similarly cyclical post-nuclear history—but after this moment he is then able to subtly and complexly formulate his notion of the imagination over the next fifty pages of prose mixed and interspersed with poetry. To begin the aesthetic work of

poetic composition *Spring and All* enacts total destruction and material repetition to introduce what for Williams is the new: a position from which, “[n]ow indeed men look about in amazement at each other with a full realization of the meaning of ‘art.’”²⁵⁶ Williams is careful to point out that in this repetition of evolution from the beginning, “the imagination is undeceived.” The imagination, in his conception, has unique access to the he “meaning” of art. Art’s power and realism does not lie in its representation or repetition of nature. Rather, “[t]he only realism in art is of the imagination. It is only thus that the work escapes plagiarism after nature and becomes creation”; and “the only world of reality that men know: the world of the imagination.”²⁵⁷

In the world of *Spring and All* the imagination is a *force*. And if the world the imagination creates is reality itself, then the idea that is *in* things, in our very experience of materiality, is a fundamentally *vital* idea. As Williams so powerfully writes, the

Imagination is not to avoid reality, nor is it description nor an evocation of objects or situations, it is to say that poetry does not tamper with the world but moves it—It affirms reality most powerfully and therefore, since reality needs no personal support but exists free from human action, as proven by science in the indestructibility of matter and of force, it creates a new object, a play, a dance which is not a mirror up to nature.²⁵⁸

For Williams the imagination is not mimetic, or not simply mimetic. It is a material force. It is vibrant, organic, and radio-active. It is scientific and geological. It is tapped into early atomic physics, before the atom was split; it is electric. And it works through *irony*. These aspects of the imagination most powerfully distinguish Williams from Coleridge specifically and from romanticism more generally. Even if clearly still revolving in a romantic orbit, the perspective on species finitude that he provides, the removal of the transcendental *logos*, the political horizon of

its historical expression and its possibilities, utopian and otherwise— the combination of these descriptions of his imagination, even if we allow him this apologia: “whatever of dull you find among my work, put it down to criticism, not to poetry”²⁵⁹—provides a significant departure from earlier imaginaries.

Williams concludes *Spring and All* by emphasizing the liberating powers of the imagination, that the imagination’s goal should be to “free the world of fact from the impositions of ‘art’ [. . .] and to liberate the man to act in whatever direction his disposition leads.”²⁶⁰ And this closing gesture does not necessarily smuggle redemption back into Williams’s notion of the imagination, because for the later Williams, one of the directions this disposition leads to circles back around to the beginning of *Spring and All*, to destruction and violence, to the bomb. There are a number of moments where Williams explicitly discusses the bomb in his later poetry, writing in “Catastrophic Birth” (1944) of “the death dealing / chemistry [that] cannot be long held back,”²⁶¹ in “The Old House” (1948) of Hiroshima and the “aftermath of ‘the bomb,’”²⁶² and in Book Four of *Paterson* (1963) of the discovery of uranium and “hydrogen / the flame, helium the / pregnant ash.”²⁶³ But it is in one of Williams’s most famous later poems, “Asphodel, that Greeny Flower” (1955), where he is the clearest about the bomb’s relationship to poetry and the imagination in the midst of the Cold War:

The poem

if it reflects the seas

reflects only

its dance

upon that profound depth

where

it seems to triumph.

The bomb puts an end

to all that.

I am reminded

that the bomb

also

is a flower

dedicated

howbeit

to our destruction.²⁶⁴

Written over thirty years after *Spring and All*, “Asphodel” profoundly resonates with Williams’s earlier nuclear imagination. Whatever mimetic power the poem may have had, reflecting itself reflecting itself in a triumph of the imagination, this is destroyed by the bomb. This does not run counter to William’s formulation of the materiality and the reality of the imagination, however, for “If a man die / it is because death / has first / possessed his imagination.”²⁶⁵ Similarly, the bomb is not opposed to the imagination, even if it puts an end to the work of the poem. Its sheer reality is a result of the kind of imagination Williams’s began *Spring and All* with; if the destruction of the human has possessed Williams’s imagination, then the eschatological horizon of the species is a result of the ability to imagine that very horizon. The end of the world, even if it is a product of the imagination, is *real*. “Only the imagination is real! / I have declared it / time without end.”²⁶⁶ More than anything else, the eschatological horizon of the nuclear here is not mere fantasy or the repetition of a previous apocalyptic imaginary. And it is precisely this very

real horizon that the imagination has access to that reveals the necessity to continue the work of the imagination.

Williams is clear in “Asphodel” that the bomb is opposed to the liberating powers of the imagination, even as it manifests the imagination’s destructive powers: “All suppressions [. . .] are confessions / that the bomb / has entered our lives / to destroy us.”²⁶⁷ The image of the exploding warhead has replaced religious idols, and now the bomb is something “to prostrate ourselves / before.”²⁶⁸ It is also, however, something whose “childlike / insistence” “we are sick to death / of,”²⁶⁹ something dumbly repeating its destructive urge. The Christian apocalypse has retreated into the background, and now men “believe rather / in the bomb / and shall die by / the bomb.”²⁷⁰ Despite this overwhelming tenor of doom, however, Williams holds out hope against the reality of the bomb’s power over modernity, and he is quite clear how to go about avoiding nuclear destruction: “But love and the imagination / are of a piece, / swift as the light / to avoid destruction.”²⁷¹

“Asphodel, that Greeny Flower” ends by noting that “It is all / a celebration of the light,” and that “Asphodel / has no odor / save to the imagination / but it too / celebrates the light.”²⁷² And in this Williams understandably retreats from the radicality of the nuclear imagination’s horror. Yes, the bomb is a product of the imagination. And the mega-death that it introduces is a product of the imagination. But the way out, toward a celebration of “light,” is also the imagination’s province. The end of “Asphodel” is Williams at his most romantic, retaining the trope of revelation or illumination, of light as a redemptive power closely associated with love. If he cannot go all the way toward the radicality of Pynchon’s deeply ironic engagement with the bomb and with light, if Williams cannot yet see the project of modernity as *capturing* the very light he holds out as redemptive, then this only serves to re-emphasize that whatever reality is

produced both prior to and in the wake of the bomb can only be brought about by the imagination, by the nuclear imagination. To see that light itself can be turned toward the process of “all suppressions, / from the witchcraft trials at Salem / to the latest / book burnings,”²⁷³ is part and parcel with the nuclear imagination, and if history and the future are not to be foreclosed in the very eschatological fire Williams is able to see as early as 1923, then the work of literature, the very necessary work of the imagination, must continue interrogating the horizon of the nuclear in order to make the opening pages of *Spring and All* remain real only on the page. And among many other things, the enduring legacy of Williams’s imagination is that the projection of the future, how we imagine the world to be in the future, continues to shape how that future is articulated in the present. If we can sit here in the wake of the Cold War on a planet that is not irradiated, it is because one of the principal effects of the nuclear imagination during the twentieth century has been its lack of actualization, its non-event. And if nothing else, *this* is the nuclear imagination’s enduring reality, and it is a reality that we owe in part to William Carlos Williams.

3.0 CRYSTALLIZING NUCLEAR TEMPORALITY: THOMAS PYNCHON AND ARCHIVAL HISTORY

Everything gets lumped together into uniform distancelessness. How? Is not this merging of everything into the distanceless more unearthly than everything bursting apart?

Man stares at what the explosion of the atom bomb could bring with it. He does not see that the atom bomb and its explosion are the mere final emission of what has long since taken place, has already happened. Not to mention the single hydrogen bomb, whose triggering, thought through to its utmost potential, might be enough to snuff out all life on earth. What is this helpless anxiety waiting for, if the terrible has already happened?

—Martin Heidegger, “The Thing”²⁷⁴

“There is no outside of Nature.”

—Vicki Kirby, *Quantum Anthropologies*²⁷⁵

If Sloth can be defined as the pretense, in the tradition of American settlement and spoliation, that time is one more nonfinite resource, there to be exploited forever, then we may for now at least have found the illusion, the effect, of controlling, reversing, slowing, speeding and repeating time—even imagining we can escape it.

—Thomas Pynchon, “The Deadly Sins/Sloth; Nearer, My Couch, to Thee”²⁷⁶

3.1 “SLOW LEARNER”

One of the most explicit discussions of eschatology in the work of Thomas Pynchon occurs not in his fiction, where events that might be called apocalyptic are often ambiguous, opaque, or asymptotically deferred, but in the introduction to the collection of his early short stories, *Slow Learner* (1984). Displaying a rare willingness to discuss his (youthful) authorial intentions and provide commentary upon his work,²⁷⁷ Pynchon situates his short story, “Entropy” (1960), between the poles of cybernetics and thermodynamics. For a perspective revolving in a nuclear critical orbit, it is crucial to make note of the following statement²⁷⁸:

I happened to read Norbert Wiener’s *The Human Use of Human Beings* [. . .] at about the same time as *The Education of Henry Adams*, and the “theme” of [“Entropy”] is mostly derivative of what these two men had to say. A pose I found congenial in those days—fairly common, I hope, among pre-adults—was that of somber glee at any idea of mass destruction or decline. The modern political thriller genre, in fact, has been known to cash in on such visions of death made large-scale or glamorous. Given my undergraduate mood, Adams’s sense of power out of control, coupled with Wiener’s spectacle of universal heat-death and mathematical stillness, seemed just the ticket. But the distance and grandiosity of this led me to short-change the humans in the story.²⁷⁹

Though the “theme” of entropy is persistent throughout Pynchon’s work, making significant reappearances in *V.* (1961), *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), and *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), and it has received considerable attention by Pynchon’s critics,²⁸⁰ it is the invocation of Adams and Wiener that should be highlighted here, specifically their influence on Pynchon’s sense of an ending. As early as “Entropy,” Pynchon’s fictional worlds exists within an eschatological space

defined by Adams and Wiener, and one could easily argue that this remains the case all the way up to his most recent novel, *Inherent Vice* (2009). Pynchon's narrative projections continually reside within a horizon defined by information and matter, cybernetics and thermodynamics, communication and physics, the archive and The Bomb.

It is equally important to note Pynchon's own judgment of his youthful apocalypticism. His "somber glee at any idea of mass destruction or decline" is characterized as "pre-adult" and "undergraduate"; his "reading at the time also included many Victorians, allowing World War I in [his] imagination to assume the shape of that attractive nuisance so dear to *adolescent* minds, the apocalyptic showdown."²⁸¹ *Slow Learner*, as its title suggests, collects what Pynchon thinks of as juvenilia and early exercises in narrative form. The apocalypse, if one does not read these statements as overly modest assessments of his early work, is not an appropriate subject for a "mature" writer, a writer who has already written *Gravity's Rainbow*, a book, according to one critic, "that is both one of the great historical novels of our time and arguably the most important literary text since *Ulysses*."²⁸² It is easy enough to read *Gravity's Rainbow* as an apocalyptic novel obsessed with twentieth century disasters, the escalation of the arms race during the 1960s, the dissolution of America during what Carl Freedman recently has called the "age of Nixon,"²⁸³ and a novel haunted by the mass-death of World War II while anxiously anticipating the Cold War and future catastrophe. Whatever one might say about *Gravity's Rainbow* and the rest of his "mature" work, however, for Pynchon the apocalypse *qua* apocalypse should be relegated to the writing of youth, the honing of one's art, an adolescent obsession to be grown out of. Reading Pynchon requires formulating an understanding of his sense of narrative that is different, perhaps more mature, than the apocalypse the apprentice writer's mind finds readily congenial. Such a narrative model should be understood as a more complex engagement with the structures Adams

and Wiener provide, something still bounded by and understood through the science of cybernetics and thermodynamics, but not over-simplifying that science for the readymade ending of “Entropy,” where the entire universe becomes a uniform 37 degrees Fahrenheit.²⁸⁴

In the introduction to *Slow Learner*, Pynchon provides a ground for how to understand such a narrative maturation and complication as he shifts his emphasis, almost imperceptibly, from the gleefully somber adolescent apocalyptic imagination, to the overwhelming anxiety created by nuclear weapons’ sheer existence.

I don’t mean to make light of this. Our common nightmare The Bomb is in [“Entropy”] *too*. It was bad enough in ’59 and is much worse now, as the level of danger has continued to grow. There was never anything subliminal about it, then or now. Except for that succession of the criminally insane who have enjoyed power since 1945, including the power to do something about it, most of the rest of *us* poor sheep have always been stuck with simple, standard fear. I think *we* have all tried to deal with this slow escalation of *our* helplessness and terror in the few ways open to *us*, from not thinking about it to going crazy from it. Somewhere on this spectrum of impotence is writing fiction about it—occasionally, as here, offset to a more colorful time and place.²⁸⁵

Here Pynchon frames “The Bomb”²⁸⁶ differently than the apocalypse, though the differentiation might seem slight at first. Even though he notes that The Bomb is in “Entropy” just as much as the “somber apocalypse” that emerged out of his reading of Adams and Wiener, The Bomb is in the story *too*; it is there along with, though it is something different than, his adolescent apocalypticism. The difference can be understood in the manner he stresses The Bomb’s reality. Its physical presence in the world defines “our helplessness and terror,” as opposed to the apocalyptic, which is merely one way of interpreting events of the past (or future), an

interpretive structure to be fitted onto whatever might suggest itself to the youthful writer's mind. Writing and thinking the apocalypse is hermeneutic, a mode of interpreting history, allowing World War I to become an apocalypse of the Victorian mode, whereas The Bomb *cannot* be interpreted, even by those with the capacity to "use" it. The Bomb is a more "mature" object of thought because it does not lend itself to familiar and readily suggested temporal and narrative forms; its terror overwhelms the mind, any mind, no matter how mature. Writing this introduction in 1984, his writing and thinking may have outgrown the apocalypse as a narrative mode, but the threat of The Bomb, the anxiety it produces, its sheer mute, dumb reality—i.e. there was never anything subliminal about it—means we *all* have to "deal with it," no matter how "mature" we may be.

Further, his mode of address here shifts dramatically, going from a youthful, solipsistic obsession with apocalypse, to noting the very real *collective* global terror inspired by The Bomb. This is one of the few moments in the introduction to *Slow Learner* where Pynchon uses the first person plural rather than the first person singular. He is not addressing himself or his work at this moment—ostensibly the appropriate subjects for an author's introduction—but rather signals that his mature writing might be understood as an utterance of a first person plural, a communal we. The apocalypse is an interpretive structure a somewhat narcissistic individual (his own youthful self) imposes upon the world. The Bomb, on the other hand, not only is too *real* for an individual to understand, thereby deserving capitalization, but must be impotently confronted by "the rest of *us* poor sheep." There is nothing to do for what Pynchon in *Gravity's Rainbow* calls the "preterit." The criminally insane have all the power over The Bomb. Capital "They" are going to destroy *us*, and there is nothing *we* can do. We can't even imagine it, let alone interpret its meaning. (Or else, it is the *only* thing we can imagine, the only thing we are called upon to

interpret.) Even worse off is the fiction writer whose job it may very well be to attempt to imagine The Bomb. The writer is tasked by the collective “we” Pynchon invokes and places himself among to attempt to describe just how its (or Their) target is *us*; and yet this writer’s impotence can be situated along an axis, palpable enough to mapped and coded. Despite all this, writing as a mode of coping with the impotence the “rest of us” feel in the face of the nuclear destruction has not caused Pynchon unambiguously to represent The Bomb nor the final logic of its global deployment.

Rather, the nuclear event appears in Pynchon as an asymptote that can never be reached, a point beyond which we cannot go, while simultaneously a limit that structures all events within its parabolic arc. In *Gravity’s Rainbow* the Rocket’s final approach to the Orpheus Theater in Los Angeles, where the reader has presumably been viewing the entirety of the narrative up until the final pages, is perhaps American literary postmodernism’s *most* representative nuclear image²⁸⁷: “And it is just here, just at this dark and silent frame, that the pointed tip of the Rocket, falling nearly a mile per second, absolutely and forever without sound, reaches its last unmeasurable gap above the roof of the old theatre, the last delta-t.”²⁸⁸ The Rocket (capitalized like “The Bomb”) emerges when the screen goes dark, ceasing to represent anything, and the audience is simply left to wait for the film to be repaired and resumed. The Rocket, however, does not explode. It hangs suspended in the infinitely miniscule gap of its asymptotic approach, forever approaching in its meaningless trajectory, silent in its eternal deferment of exploding, an Achilles to the theater’s tortoise. The appeal of Pynchon’s striking image can be located within the impossibility of experiencing the explosion: to have heard the rocket’s approach means one has survived, left to impotently speak in the aftermath; to have not heard its approach is to be buried by the disaster.²⁸⁹ “He won’t hear the thing come in. It travels faster than the speed of

sound. The first news you get of it is the blast. Then, if you're still around, you hear the sound of it coming in."²⁹⁰ *Gravity's Rainbow*, as has been extensively commented upon,²⁹¹ exists both in the aftermath of the explosion—"A screaming comes across the sky,"²⁹² the novel's famous first sentence, can be heard because the rocket has already fallen—and in anticipation of a final explosion which will make mimesis and hermeneutics meaningless activities: extinction cannot be written about, let alone made meaningful after the fact. The Rocket has both fallen and exists in a new dispensation that cannot be compared to previous explosions: "It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now."²⁹³ In these asymptotic reversals, Pynchon effectively displaces the commonplace, cliché apocalypse of his own adolescent imagination, and thereby sutures the past, present, and future to some event that either did, may, or will never occur, inscribing the nuclear referent upon the temporalities and narratives of his larger historical project. Tyrone Slothrop's journey through the Zone in *Gravity's Rainbow* begins always already in the wake of his own anticipation of this event that has already occurred but cannot happen. He is American literature's nuclear (rather than the apocalyptic) character *par excellence*. He is not waiting for the *telos* of history, for its completion, for the "to come" of the apocalypse, but rather is a figure who exists in the ruins and aftermath of a shattered history without purpose, desperately awaiting another explosion that cannot come, or if it does come, cannot be experienced, and if experienced, would be incomparable to any previous event.

Pynchon's nuclear worlds, however, are not the bleak post-apocalyptic wastelands of, for example, Samuel Becket's *Endgame* (1958) or Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006); nor do his worlds after "Entropy" approach H.G. Wells's time traveler perched on the edge of time itself, witnessing the entropic decline of the planet and universal heat-death.²⁹⁴ Pynchon's worlds are consistently full of striking fantasy and color. His narratives, rather than sites approaching static

inertia, are spatio-temporal constructs where matter vibrates in vitally complex ways, often rupturing or displacing the very fabric of space-time itself.²⁹⁵ His worlds are dynamic, allowing, for example, the Chums of Chance in *Against the Day* (2006) to travel through the center of a hollow Earth, to a parallel though different Earth on the other side of the sun, and to other dimensions entirely. Such transgressions of space-time move Pynchon's eschatology from the apocalyptic to the nuclear, from the entropic to the emergent, from the young individual writer trying to cope with and represent the world, to a palpable species-level existential dread being impotently faced by writing the fantastic, the vital, and the weird.

Pynchon's fantastic nuclear spaces are not simply the simulation and simulacra of disaster and the Bomb, nor does he ignore the realities of the historical nuclear past within these landscapes. Peter Schwenger, in his compelling nuclear critical study, *Letter Bomb* (1993), convincingly argues that The Bomb predominantly functions in *Gravity's Rainbow* as Pynchon's engagement with the United States' decision to deploy atomic weaponry at the conclusion of World War II. This is not simply the case because atomic bombs are dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki during the chronology of the novel's narrative, but "of all the horrors of Hiroshima, that which distinguishes it from every comparable horror is that it is *not finished*. I am speaking of the deferred action of the bomb not on the bodies of its victims but on the minds of all those who live in the world that it dominates."²⁹⁶ In other words, though The Rocket (The Bomb) hurtles toward the theater in Los Angeles and the horrors that are not finished are still asymptotically in the future, the fact of the matter is, The Bomb has already exploded at Hiroshima and its traumatic effects continue to dominate minds in the present. Any imaginative, narrative engagement with the nuclear Bomb in Pynchon's present must necessarily take place in

Hiroshima's aftermath, even as it anticipates further destruction. (This recursive loop is a familiar structure in the nuclear imagination as I have sketched it thus far.)

When one steps back from the recursively (and obviously) nuclear *Gravity's Rainbow* and considers Pynchon's work as a whole, though it becomes more difficult to definitively locate the nuclear referent in his other novels, the synchronic temporality of his fiction—in its tendency to elide familiar formulations of *eros* and *thanatos*, of genesis and ending—functions in a similarly nuclear fashion. This recursive narrative form is distinct in Pynchon's fiction. I will argue that it is The Bomb itself he bends forward and backward through history to create his non-linear temporality. Further, this narrative trajectory, this *bending*, as it swerves erratically through different historical modernisms (and postmodernisms), can be primarily understood through Pynchon's engagement with that mysterious entity *light*. Constantly revolving among the major scientific fields of the twentieth century—cybernetics, thermodynamics, and quantum physics, among others—Pynchon's world(s) are constructed as crystals of relativity capable of warping the space-time of history itself. To access The Bomb writing, or the writing of The Bomb, the missing, occluded, and ungraspable component of Pynchon's history, namely light, illuminates the archival accumulation and destruction of The Bomb's (retroactive) insertion into history.

The Rocket falls at the end of *Gravity's Rainbow* on a room in darkness. We begin the novel: "But it's night. He's afraid of the way the glass will fall—soon—it will be a spectacle: the fall of a crystal palace. But coming down in total blackout, without one glint of light, only great invisible crashing."²⁹⁷ Awaiting a spectacle, an image of crystal falling that can only be heard in the absolute darkness as an "invisible crashing," the novel begins and ends in the same space. This is the space of nuclear singularity, gravity having affected light to the point that even the

light from a nuclear explosion cannot escape the Black Hole of its own historical trajectory and logic. The title of *Gravity's Rainbow* can be read as the impossibility of escaping Earth's gravity and the novel's action should be mapped along such a parabola; and of course, if extreme enough, gravity is a force capable of capturing light itself. Thus, one might suggest that an "illuminated" understanding of The Bomb is prevented from within the darkness of its *own* history, and consequently, a subject in *Gravity's Rainbow* has no other position in relationship to The Bomb than this anxious awaiting in the darkness of a "to come" that cannot arrive. What falls back to earth in *Gravity's Rainbow* is not merely The Rocket. The *rainbow itself*—a parabola that is also a spectrum of light—is swallowed up by The Bomb. Consequently, to understand the Bomb, one must step outside of its historical, eschatological trajectory defined by the narrative and historical structure of *Gravity's Rainbow* and late-twentieth century anxieties. To do this, Pynchon projects nuclear moments *luminously* into the historical past in his other novels, accessing points when one can step out of the asymptotic darkness of *Gravity's Rainbow's* nuclear singularity, and thereby imagines a deep kind of multiplicitous history for the Bomb a Nietzsche of "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" (1874) might have well appreciated.

Pynchon's nuclear imagination, by exploring how light functions throughout his narratives, thus articulates itself in general as a rewriting of history, and in particular, as a reconsideration of the nuclear referent in history. This rewriting (or more accurately, this revising) does not function to change history. It does not create an "alternate" history, nor simply explore historical possibilities that never occurred, as in Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004), or Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Years of Rice and Salt* (2002). Rather, Pynchon's historical project presents a plurality of

possibilities, some realized, others abandoned or refracted. In doing so he constantly emphasizes the act of *writing* history. His historical imagination is defined by the need to write the secret histories that are occluded by “reality.” This often takes the form of unveiling “conspiracies,” outing clandestine societies, and unlocking hidden archives. Though always acknowledged as impossible to *reveal*—i.e. there is no apocalypse *per se*, no revelation proper—the *forces* of history, in Pynchon’s terms, can best be captured by updating Adams’s symbol of the dynamo. The forces at work in the physical world: time, gravity, light, quantum mechanics, entropy, chaos, etc., represent this occluded history, the history that gets ignored by anthropocentric and anthropomorphic eschatological narratives. Of course this is not to say that Pynchon ignores the human. Far from it, as the thousands of characters in his fiction attest to the complexity of the human as a category in his work. As subjects *and* objects of history, Pynchon’s characters map a complex network of relationships, both to other humans and to the material world. Sometimes this latter relationship is expressed through direct alteration of the world through some sort of violent act—the V2 bombs falling, for instance—but just as often it is presented as a slippage in and around the material world, a break from one particular instantiation of actually-lived-reality to another. All this tends to take place during a “new kind of time,”²⁹⁸ and this new kind of temporality can best be described by the different ways light bends through space and, ultimately, through the archive. Over the course of his oeuvre, from *Mason & Dixon* (1997), largely set in the eighteenth century, to the 1980s of *Vineland* (1990), Pynchon’s historical and archival timeline occurs as a nuclear drama of light, a narrative that unsettlingly explores both modernity’s reifying project of capturing light, and possible modes of resistance available to the postmodern subject of the twenty-first century optical society.

3.2 ATOMIC MIMESIS: THE BOMB AND *GRAVITY'S RAINBOW*

One significant aspect of Pynchon that must be confronted for any discussion of his relationship to The Bomb is the simple fact, mentioned above, that nowhere does he unambiguously represent an atomic explosion or anything resembling global nuclear war. Though there are many speculative aspects to Pynchon's work, and his various affinities with science fiction cannot be ignored, his commitment to exploring history, a history in which global nuclear war has not taken place, necessitates eschewing certain kinds of futurity for his projected worlds. Though that futurity should always be understood as one that might not take place, the dominant narrative mode of twentieth century nuclear fiction—projecting disaster into some moment in the future—significantly, does not occur in Pynchon.

This is not to ignore, however, how the historical event of The Bomb dropped on Hiroshima functions in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Near the end of the novel, in the final moment that one can call Slothrop a distinct individual, the final scene before he becomes “[s]cattered all over the Zone,”²⁹⁹ he catches a glimpse of a headline:

In one of those streets, in the morning fog, plastered over two slippery cobblestones, is a scrap of newspaper headline, with a wirephoto of a giant white cock, dangling in the sky straight downward out of a white pubic bush. The letters

MB DRO

ROSHI

appear above with the logo of some occupation newspaper, a grinning glamour girl riding astraddle the cannon of a tank, steel penis with slotted serpent head, 3rd Armored treads 'n' triangle on a sweater rippling across her tits. The white image has the same

coherence, the hey-lookit-me smugness, as the Cross does. It is not only a sudden white genital onset in the sky—it is also, perhaps, a Tree³⁰⁰

In all of Pynchon's work, this is the most explicitly nuclear moment. It reports the historical event of Hiroshima, provides an image of the explosion, and it is *Gravity's Rainbow's* “protagonist” who encounters this fragment of newspaper. The complexity of this point in the novel cannot be overstated, and to understand how the nuclear referent functions in Pynchon's work in a larger sense, it deserves sustained attention.

First and foremost, the inability for language and text to capture the event is underscored by the fragmentation of the famous, though fabricated, headline, “ATOM BOMB DROPPED ON HIROSHIMA,” into “MB DRO / ROSHI.” In attempting to represent the historical actuality of the event, only destroyed text, text erased by the wet, foggy streets, is possible. When reported in such a fashion, Hiroshima becomes a site of fragmentation, misrepresentation, and misreading. The ability to capture this (or any) event is implicated in a process of archival decay as documents fray and fragment in their futile attempts at atomic mimesis. Slothrop has some connection to the historical event, but it is (at least) twice removed. As in so many other places in the novel, the characters in *Gravity's Rainbow* have a marginal relationship to “official history” at best. Steven Weisenburger makes clear in his companion to the novel that Pynchon painstakingly mined *The Times* of London, *The New York Times*, and other sources to provide tiny details to make the chronology of the novel correspond with the actual events of history,³⁰¹ details that add considerable texture to the historical moments *Gravity's Rainbow* inhabits, but these details are usually tangential to the more “familiar” historical events of World War II. Slothrop, wandering the various streets of postwar German towns at this point in the novel—Stralsund, Greifswald, Rostock—has not heard news of The Bomb being dropped on 6 August

1945, but rather first hears of Hiroshima in what must be days afterward through a text whose very authority is doubtful. He is on the margins of history here, only able to read an already fragmenting and disappearing history, unable to encounter the nuclear thing itself, an event that is already situated in an ambiguous past.

To further complicate the newspaper fragment's relationship to Hiroshima, this document, unlike Pynchon's use of actual articles from *The Times*, cannot be said to really even exist except as an imaginative construction. For instance, the headline from the front page of *The New York Times* on 7 August 1945, reads: "First Atomic Bomb Dropped on Japan; Missile is Equal to 20,000 tons of TNT; Truman Warns Foes of a 'Rain of Ruin,'" ³⁰² with no photograph whatsoever of the mushroom cloud. Only five days later did *The New York Times* publish photographs of the explosions at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and they were buried on page 28. ³⁰³ There is a temporal and historical conflation in the newspaper fragment from *Gravity's Rainbow* that combines reporting the event and the presentation of its iconic image, an elision further complicated by the many significant events between these two moments of documentation. ³⁰⁴ This image of a monumental nuclear history, for the narrative purposes of *Gravity's Rainbow*, gets temporally distorted and refracted, the image imposed upon a headline in a text that never (could have) existed. Pynchon's temporal manipulation of text and image, of the moment of historical reportage and the release of the photographs, should be emphasized here, for this manipulation serves to undermine the authority and authenticity of the image as it is described in the novel as well.

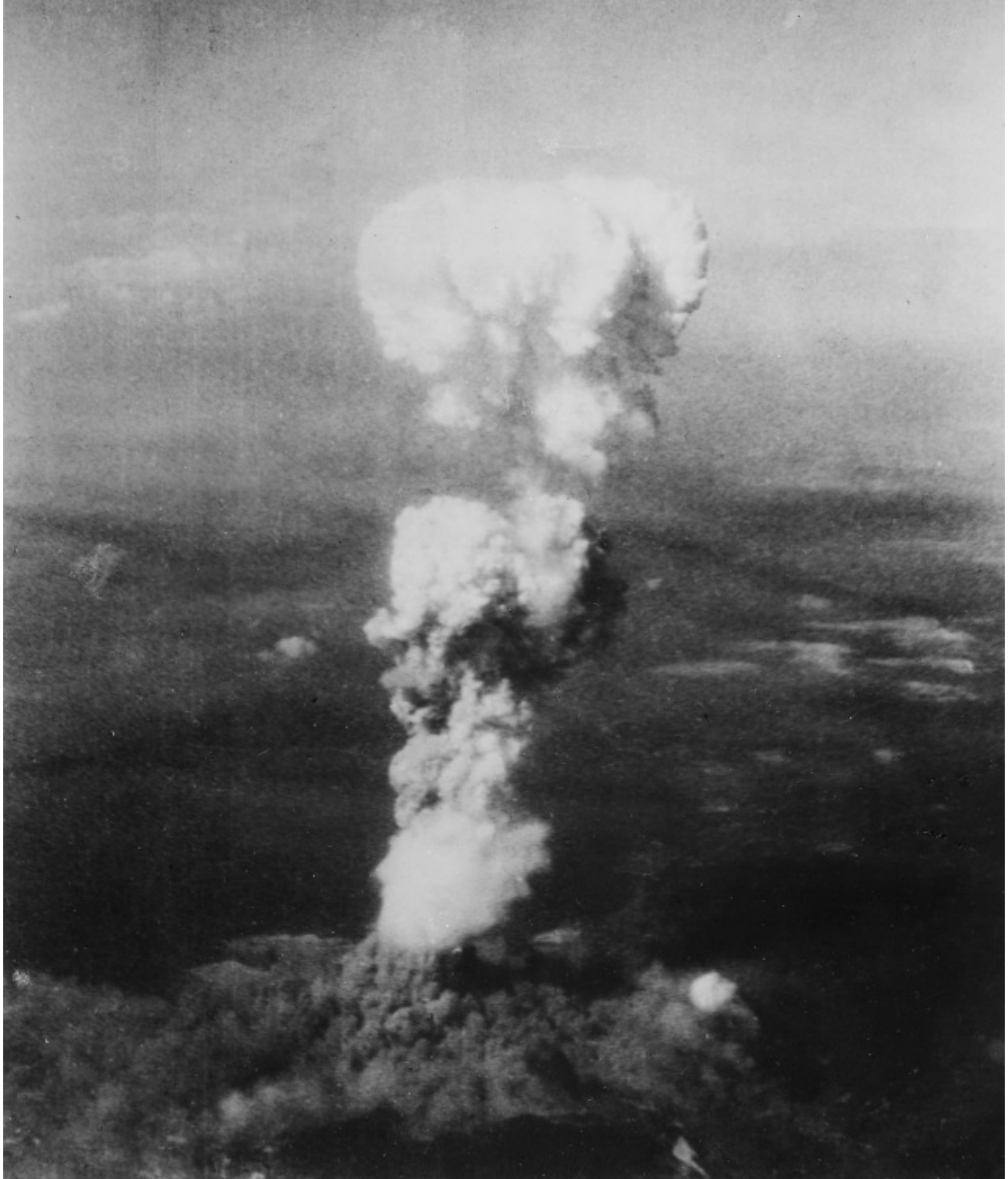


Figure 2: Atomic Bombing of Hiroshima, 6 August 1945.

Throughout the subsection of *Gravity's Rainbow*, "Streets," in which Slothrop finds the newspaper fragment in the morning, nothing is very clear. Slothrop is unsure of his actual physical location, whether it is Stralsund, Greifswald, or Rostock, as the physical aspects of each city blend into one another. This causes him to imagine, before the bomb is even mentioned, that his inability to place himself—that everything looks the same as somewhere else—is because "[p]erhaps there is a new bomb that can destroy only the *insides* of structures."³⁰⁵ The slippage of location, the blending of buildings into one another, creates a relativistic space defined by architecture without interiority. Slothrop's projection of homogeneous urban space, defined by interchangeable exteriors, transforms the Zone into a veritable film set, with its empty façades and smooth exterior surfaces covering a lack of interiority. This "new bomb," which is also The Bomb whose image he is about to encounter, turns his world into pure Hollywood spectacle, only the interchangeable urban façades are necessary for the evocation of realistic space. Slothrop is firmly in the world of the fantasmatic and the filmic, a world of pure appearances, a space dominated by the ability to manipulate images, a space that is already *produced* by The Bomb that exploded at some relatively indeterminate time in the recent past. It is only within such Pynchonian space that Slothrop can encounter the newspaper reporting the attack on Hiroshima.

Further veiling and distorting the particulars of his surroundings, the entire scene, wherever it might be, is ensconced in fog: "Strips of insulation hang up in the morning fog, after a night of moon brightening and darkening as if by itself, because the blowing fog was so smooth, so hard to see."³⁰⁶ Looking at the picture does not decrease the foggiess of the setting: "Slothrop sits on the curbstone watching it, and the letters, and girl with steel cock waving hi fellas, as the fog whitens into morning, and figures with carts, or dogs, or bicycles go by in

brown-gray outlines, wheezing, greeting briefly in fog-flattened voices, passing. He doesn't remember sitting on the curb for so long staring at the picture. But he did."³⁰⁷ Fog veils everything Slothrop sees, the newspaper, his setting, and the people surrounding him. Thus it would be wrong to read Hiroshima's presence in *Gravity's Rainbow* as a revelation, an "apocalypse." The explosion has not torn away the veil and revealed some underlying truth, but the opposite: it has served to further veil the very reality Slothrop inhabits, foreclosing the possibility of apocalyptic revelation. The fog is also produced by The Bomb and is analogous to the white smoke rising from its explosion, and even the fog itself is difficult to discern (somehow drifting, in an elision of space, from Japan to northern Germany).

Consequently, the image that Slothrop sees, the "wirephoto of a giant white cock" is a representation of the nuclear that we would do well to question, both through its inability to provide revelation and as always already thoroughly mediated. The image is seen through several glasses darkly, a mechanical reproduction of the mechanical destruction of matter. Nuclear fission is only conveyed in Pynchonian space by a heavily mediated image. In a McLuhanesque fashion, the medium here really *is* the message.³⁰⁸ If each successive media technology's "message," its subject matter or content, is a previous technology, then Pynchon forces us to consider that matter itself is now a media technology, something to be manipulated, changed, destroyed, and created (fusion and fission), all in order to convey a spectacle, to communicate something (mass-death), to extend human senses all the way down to the molecular and atomic. The nuclear medium's expression, the destruction of matter itself, can only be perceived at a vast distance, through multiple layers of text and manipulated images in a physical space that is already thoroughly filmic and mediated.

But the mushroom cloud rising into the sky is not an image that has, through its reproduction, lost what Walter Benjamin famously called an “aura” in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936). For a consideration of the “nuclear object,” we would do well to recall that Benjamin does not limit himself to exclusively considering the aura of aesthetic objects, but notes the aura in natural objects as well:

We define the aura of [natural objects] as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be. If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch. This image makes it easy to comprehend the contemporary decay of the aura. . . . Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction.³⁰⁹

In constructing an image of a nuclear object as he does, Pynchon forecloses any possibility of an “aura,” whether it be aesthetic or “natural,” and affirms the epigraph from Heidegger that begins this chapter, where he says of the atomic bomb that it is only the grossest example of the “merging of everything into the distanceless [that is] more unearthly than everything bursting apart.” To perceive an “aura” in an “authentic” object requires some amount of distance. The nuclear object is essentially the atom, matter itself, and its fusion (or fission) presumably brings human senses into direct contact with the object. And yet, for Heidegger, “despite the conquest of distances the nearness of things remains absent.”³¹⁰ Neither Slotthrop nor the audience of *Gravity’s Rainbow* is nearer the “nuclear Thing” than the pilot of the *Enola Gay*, the camera operator of *The Necessary Evil*, Bernard Waldman, who took the photograph of Hiroshima, nor anyone else who remains in the wake of the blast (let alone the scientists who worked on the

Manhattan Project). The only experience of the nuclear object in-and-of-itself is to be destroyed by its realization and emergence—its explosion. Whatever is “authentic” about the nuclear can only be experienced in annihilation; to encounter the nuclear-itself is to be destroyed. The withering of the aura Benjamin perceives in the age of mechanical reproduction has been completed in Pynchon’s postmodernism, the aura of any object whatsoever having completely disappeared, and necessarily so, for to continue to encounter an aura in Pynchonian space is destructive. Matter itself, the “natural” object, loses any possibility for authenticity in Pynchon’s nuclear image, and we are consequently forced to reconsider “nature” as a category of possible experience or encounter.

Consequently, Slothrop’s discovery of the nuclear image cannot really be said to be an encounter with an object at all, let alone the nuclear object. There is nothing to see, no “reality” of the nuclear that the phenomenal world is somehow veiling. There is *only* the veil, and this is at the heart of Pynchon’s rejection of the apocalyptic as a structure for his narrative in favor of the nuclear. Discussing something slightly different, but still *apropos* for my purposes, Slavoj Žižek notes that

[i]f, behind the phenomenal veil, there is nothing, it is through the mediation of this “nothing” that the subject constitutes himself in the very act of his misrecognition. The illusion that there is something hidden behind the curtain is thus a reflexive one: what is hidden behind the appearance is the possibility of this very illusion—behind the curtain is the fact that the subject thinks something must be behind it.³¹¹

Slothrop’s entire subjectivity until this point in the novel has been constructed by his paranoia, his fear that there is a “They” behind the curtain of his experience, manipulating, controlling, and constructing him. His experience of phenomenal reality is a misrecognition that always verges on

“the discovery that *everything is connected*, everything in Creation, a secondary illumination—not yet blindingly One, but at least connected, and perhaps a route In.”³¹² And even if, to a large extent, Slothrop’s paranoia is appropriate—for there often really is someone or something out to get him—this does not lessen the fact that his subjectivity is constructed through his misrecognition of how things are connected and what their connections might mean. His first “reading” or interpretation of the nuclear image as sexualized and phallic cannot then be said to represent the underlying “truth” of Pynchon’s nuclear image then: that the nuclear is essentially an outgrowth of a phallogocentric, masculine, patriarchal, war-mongering culture. But this is also not to suggest that there is anything *except* this reading available to Slothrop. His misrecognition, his interpretation is always a “secondary illumination” with no originary, singular unity having produced this image except Slothrop’s hermeneutic activity that assumes there must be something behind it.

The image of The Bomb may be a simulacrum, but as the simulacra is the only thing we or Slothrop are given to understand, then the sexuality of this image deserves to be taken quite seriously even if the only truth of the image is its illusion. Further, the sexual metaphors here are more complex and compelling than they might first appear. When Pynchon writes about Masonic conspiracies earlier in the novel, he notes that “we must also never forget famous Missouri Mason Harry Truman: sitting by virtue of death in office, this very August 1945, with his control-finger poised right on Miss Enola Gay’s clit, making ready to tickle 100,000 little yellow folks into what will come down as a fine vapor-deposit of fat-cracklings wrinkled into the fused rubble of their city on the Inland Sea. . . .”³¹³ Here we glimpse that the nuclear is more than simply a phallus, as it unites Freud’s *eros* and *thanatos* through Pynchon’s characterization of the nuclear as *both* phallic and clitoral. The “button” or catalyst is feminine and orgasmic; the

event is masculine (but also, of course, *vice versa*). The nuclear is capable of being perceived as male or female, and this is precisely what Slothrop sees: both a maternal genesis and eschatological phallus in the rising smoke. As should be clear, even a brief perusal of the opening of *Gravity's Rainbow* forces one to confront the overly-phallic in Pynchon's exhaustive accounting of Pirate Prentice's famous Banana Breakfasts. And one cannot fail to note the phallic nature of the Rocket, specifically in the final scenes when the Schwarzgerät is wrapped around Gottfried like the Cassock in Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851). But it should also be stressed that the 00000 Rocket containing the Gottfried "payload" is a womb capable of containing or giving birth to a nuclear subject. This and further layers of sexual imagery prevent a reading of the nuclear here as a purely masculine or feminine event. Not only are these images queered, they also contain their opposite. And so we must ask what sexual act is being performed, and what it produces, if anything at all.

"At the instant it happened, the pale Virgin was rising in the east, head, shoulders, breasts, 17° 36' down to her maidenhead at the horizon. A few doomed Japanese knew of her as some Western deity to be sacrificed. The sun was in Leo. The fireburst came roaring and sovereign"³¹⁴ The phallus is both penetrating the ground, creating its own penetration out of its birth or explosion, while simultaneously contained in and birthed from the womb of Virgo. The victims are tickled, arriving at orgasmic destruction. But it is also a rising Cross and the world tree Yggdrasil. As Slothrop performs his reading of the image, it becomes capable of representing Adams's Virgin and Dynamo simultaneously. We are moving in the realm of the thoroughly, if confusingly archetypal, and clearly, as Harold Bloom would have it, "Pynchon's despair of his own Gnostic Kabbalah."³¹⁵ The sexualization of the nuclear image quickly threatens to become anything and everything. Slothrop's encounter with this image creates

accumulating and potentially infinite interpretations, and these proliferating interpretations threaten to engulf *any* reading. This operation is Pynchonian irony at its best, and ultimately a site of interpretive breakdown.

Contra Žižek, for whom “it is through the mediation of this ‘nothing’ that the subject constitutes himself in the very act of his misrecognition,” when Slothrop is confronted with the picture of Hiroshima, spending an unconsciously long amount of time staring at the image, this is not a moment of subjective formation but rather the opposite. *He cannot look away*. And then he is scattered across the Zone, multiplied and transformed into a rhizomatic and nomadic network. *His inability to cease interpreting the nuclear image causes his dispersal*. Confronted with the accumulation of references—sexual, historical, textual, and mimetic—the images refuse to coalesce into an apocalyptic interpretation of history, a confirmation of his paranoia, nor much else. There is an accumulation of data, a swelling of textuality at this moment that cannot be comprehended. The threat to a subject like Slothrop, and thus the preterit and the schlemihl as well, is textual; the very condition of the nuclear subject then is less that the subject is threatened by the void, or that illusions keep one from a transcendental or apocalyptic truth, than that the interpretations one is forced to arrive at out of an encounter with the nuclear—a nuclear that can also, consequently, be found *anywhere*—create a subject threatened and dissolved by textual accumulation, by the inability to stop interpreting an effluvium of text.³¹⁶

In this fashion Pynchon suggests that for the post-nuclear subject, a subject that is always already scattered, dispersed over a network of conflicting images proliferating from the trauma of Hiroshima, history is *radiant*. Events as singular as Hiroshima and Nagasaki flirt with infinite regress—a kind of historic Casimir effect of nuclear representation, as they spill over into the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twenty-first centuries. The radiation emitted from the fragment of

newspaper Slothrop finds on the ground explodes backwards and forwards through Pynchon's historical novels in luminous moments of nuclear narrativity. But, like the parabola light defines in relationship to a singularity, Pynchon's atomic light cannot escape the black of hole of (its own) history.

3.3 NUCLEAR LUMINOSITY: THE FABULOUS METAHISTORICAL TEXTUALITY OF *MASON & DIXON*

"As if. . . there were no single Destiny [. . .] but rather a choice among a great many possible ones, their number steadily diminishing each time a Choice be made, till at last 'reduc'd,' to the events that do happen to us, as we pass among 'em, thro' Time unredeemable,—much as a Lens, indeed, may receive all the Light from some vast celestial Field of View, and reduce it to a single Point."

—Thomas Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon*³¹⁷

To begin to explore Pynchon's luminous history, I would like to turn to a novel that, at first glance, one would hardly accuse of being nuclear in any way. Framed in Philadelphia during Christmastide of 1786 on the eve of the Constitutional Congress, *Mason & Dixon* spins a fantastic yarn, told by a Reverend Cherrycoke, about Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon surveying their historically significant border. Drawing us further from the present, Pynchon employs a number of stylistic and grammatical aspects of late eighteenth century English prose throughout the narrative that produces a texture of periodicity while consistently removing us from a coherent sense of history through the novel's frequent anachronistic and ahistorical

references. (E.g., five pages in, Pynchon makes a reference to Bill Clinton that a contemporary reader would find difficult to miss.³¹⁸) As sprawling and encyclopedic as *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Mason & Dixon*, as one recent critic notes, “rewrites the American romance to foreground the anti-heroic realities of the historic record, complicating in the process the naïve heroism of patriotic historical narratives.”³¹⁹ An at times brutal critique of American origin myths, slavery, European imperialism, and the Enlightenment (among other things), *Mason & Dixon* is also particularly *luminous*.

The novel is everywhere saturated by invocations of light. Over the course of the novel the astronomers Mason and Dixon survey the famous line that would geographically separate Delaware and Pennsylvania from Maryland and Virginia. In doing so, I would like to argue that they inscribe a hermeneutics of light upon the novel's relationship to history. Marking what would eventually be slave states from free states, their interpretation of light, of reading the heavens to draw an imaginary line upon the earth (also marking the boundary of the state), not only evokes the American Civil War, but, in the greater sense of Pynchon's *oeuvre*, a “terrible simple nearness to the Night of the ‘Black Hole,’ some Zero-Point of history.”³²⁰ The violence of history is thus traced throughout *Mason & Dixon* along geometries of light. And as there is a significant difference between how the astronomers of the novel understood their principle object, and how modern physics understands light, Pynchon's most obvious project in the novel—a complex critique of the Enlightenment—grounds itself in the break Einstein's notion of relativity makes with Newtonian mechanics.³²¹ (That there are other effects of this break in the novel upon notions of space, time, history, and matter should also be evident.)

Unlike *Gravity's Rainbow*, however, *Mason & Dixon* is much less concerned with the *event* of history. Rather, its narrative is pieced together in a complex web of fidelities and

infidelities to the historical record. Throughout, Pynchon's imagination and prose display a kind of *archival violence*, a merciless project of weaving together debris from the ash bin of history into a fascinating and, at times, incoherent pastiche of events. The eschatological limit of such an archivally violent narrative is not the asymptote of *Gravity's Rainbow*, however, but how the 00000 Rocket, in a certain paradoxical sense, had in fact reached its destination: "Snow balls have flown their Arcs, starr'd the Sides of Outbuildings."³²²

This first of line of the novel is a complex image that immediately signals the end of the Cold War, *Gravity's Rainbow*,³²³ and a complex hermeneutics of an illuminated, non-teleological history. The Bomb falling at the end of *Gravity's Rainbow* is revealed, in the wake of the Cold War, as nothing more than a snowball that has *already* flown its arc. The nuclear missiles threatening MAD become harmless projectiles thrown at a family gathering immediately following Christmas.³²⁴ The potential for a "hot" war, in Pynchon's 1990s, has frozen in the wake of the Cold War. The novel then reads this initial explosion, this non-event, in recursive patterns as a Zero-Point, a narrative asymptote that was never reached, but nevertheless as something that radiates in both the star-pattern the snowball makes upon impact, and the deeper fractal structures of the snowflakes themselves. Further, this non-event is temporally convoluted. The snowballs *have flown* their arcs; they have been launched and landed in the past, *before* the establishment of the United States as a nation. Thermonuclear war, then, is presented as both something that did not happen (the Bombs were really just snowballs) and something always already present in American history (they land before the Constitutional Congress of 1787). As such, Pynchon immediately invites us to read the crystals of his textual snowflakes how his astronomer/astrologers read the stars. As Mason comments at one point, "'Surely, at the end of the day, we serve no master but Him that regulates the movements of the Heav'ns, which

taken together form a cryptick Message.”³²⁵ For Mason, deeply embedded in a world of Newtonian mechanics (which, of course, is constantly breaking down), history is something that can be read, and the stars are reality’s cryptic, convoluted text. The stars created by the snowballs (or the [unexploded] Bombs) rewrite American history itself. To interpret the cryptic message of the (non-)explosion of the bombs, of the stars, is to engage with a recursive hermeneutics of material reality as it is observed in various phenomena of light.

Further, it is important that the surface these snowballs have exploded upon is an “Outbuilding.” *Mason & Dixon* concerns itself with history as it is crashes against the outbuilding—history as shithouse. Cousin Ethelmer, whose conception of history is quite close to that of the narrator Cherrycoke, describes the formation and aims of writing this history:

“Who claims Truth, Truth abandons. History is hir’d, or coerc’d, only in Interests that must ever prove base. She is too innocent, to be left within the reach of anyone in Power,— who need but touch her, and all her Credit is in the instant vanish’d, as if it had never been. She needs rather to be tended lovingly and honorably by fabulists and counterfeiters, Ballad-Mongers and Cranks of ev’ry Radius, Masters of Disguise to provide her the Costume, Toilette, and Bearing, and Speech nimble enough to keep her beyond the Desires, or even the Curiosity, of Government.”³²⁶

Ethelmer, and by proxy Cherrycoke and Pynchon himself, has a sense of history here quite similar to Walter Benjamin’s famous “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940). History is written by the victors in the service of “Power” and “Government,” and Cherrycoke’s task as narrator is “to brush history against the grain.”³²⁷ Rather than claiming his account of Mason and Dixon’s adventures is the “Truth,” to keep history beyond the interests of power, it must be fabulistic and counterfeit: “‘Twasn’t Gibbon’s sort of History [. . .] that I meant,— rather, Jack

Mandeville, Captain John Smith, even to Baron Munchausen of our own day.”³²⁸ Consequently, rather than relate a heroic tale of Mason and Dixon that would lend ideological support to the emerging nation, Cherrycoke concerns himself with the waste and detritus of history, the marginal, forgotten, and hidden histories deposited in the outbuildings of time. That the scatological history of *Mason & Dixon* is largely fabricated artifice is of little concern, for to read the history of the non-event of the Bomb, to understand how it radiates into the past represented in Pynchon’s novel, is not to understand it in terms of those in power, but, as Pynchon says in the introduction to *Slow Learner*, to approach it from the position of the rest of “us,” from the position of preterition.³²⁹

The presence (or rather, absence) of The Bomb in *Mason & Dixon* is further complicated by the novel’s sense of, and the preterit’s relationship to, historical time. Supposedly written in Cherrycoke’s (fictional) book *Christ and History*, the epigraph to chapter 35, in which the above conversation takes place, evokes Pynchon’s sense of his historical novel’s temporality:

“Facts are but the Play-things of lawyers,— Tops and Hoops, forever a-spin. . . Alas, the Historian may indulge no such idle Rotating. History is not Chronology, for that is left to Lawyers,— nor is it Remembrance, for Remembrance belongs to the People. History can as little pretend to the Veracity of the one, as claim the Power of the other,— her Practitioners, to survive, must soon learn the arts of the quidnunc, spy, and Taproom Wit,— that there may ever continue more than one life-line back into a Past we risk, each day, losing our forebears in forever,— not a Chain of single Links, for one broken Link could lose us All,— rather a great disorderly Tangle of Lines, long and short, weak and strong, vanishing into the Mnemonick Deep, with only their Destination in common.”³³⁰

History for Pynchon is not collective memory nor a mere chronology of events, but a tangle of interweaving lines, a disordered network of threads that depends upon gossip, secrecy, conspiracy, and (drunken) humor to be written. The preservation of “us all” depends upon projecting this tangle of history. Rather than the monolithic narrative of the State interpellating its citizens through an imaginative geographic or eschatological boundary—the “arbitrary” borders of the nation and the national fantasy of global nuclear war—the task of Cherrycoke’s historian, and consequently Pynchon as a novelist, is to spin facts into not merely a yarn, but a quilt. Not a calendar, but a fabulist landscape playing with the historical record.³³¹

The history of the Bomb for the post-Cold War Pynchon, then, does not evoke a clear line of progression from the Enlightenment to the present, from Newton to 1945, but rather constitutes a tangled web of interconnecting threads that must be continually, imaginatively, and inventively rewoven if the past is not to disappear entirely. That there is an echo of Derrida’s “hypothesis [. . .] of a total and remainderless destruction of the archive,”³³² should also be emphasized. In Cherrycoke’s account, if we view history as a single chain, a break in this chain threatens to “lose us All.” The Bomb here is simultaneously the break that would interrupt the chain, destroying the archive and “us All,” as well as these lines’ common destination, a destination that is both MAD and a present in which that event did not occur. Consequently, The Bomb’s threat to history and the archive should be understood within the fullness of its non-event in the present of a post-Cold War United States and how this non-event is retroactively rewritten in Pynchon’s fabulous reimagining of American history.

Though there are a few episodes that one might read as apocalyptic, or else as nuclear allegories³³³—and indeed, given the Puritan tenor of the novel’s setting, there are a few different eschatological threads Pynchon weaves throughout—the simple fact remains that, beyond the

first line of the novel, locating the nuclear referent in *Mason & Dixon* is a tangled business. For the non-event of thermonuclear war results in a doubling of the nuclear referent's anachronism: it is neither "appropriate" for a historical novel set in the eighteenth century, nor does it evoke the sense of terror it evoked for the Pynchon of *Slow Learner*'s introduction in the 1990s US cultural imagination. In other words, I am not arguing that *Mason & Dixon* is "about" the nuclear bomb, nor even, necessarily, is it "about" the end of the Cold War. Rather, because of both its setting in a pre-national past, and its deeply complex use of light, *Mason & Dixon* forces us to reread the tangled threads of its own complex historiography as seriously engaging with the nuclear epoch in a manner similar to how Derrida (curiously) suggests certain pre-nuclear modernists might be read as dealing "seriously" with the nuclear referent: "[L]iterature has always belonged to the nuclear epoch, even if it does not talk 'seriously' about it. And in truth I believe that the nuclear epoch is dealt with more 'seriously' in the writings of Mallarmé, of Kafka, or Joyce, for example, than in present-day novels that would describe a 'true' nuclear catastrophe directly and in a 'realistic' fashion."³³⁴

For all the suggestive moments of Derrida's essay, "No Apocalypse, Not Now," the claim that a writer like Joyce, who died in 1941, deals more "seriously" with the nuclear epoch than post-1945 novels, has received surprisingly little attention. This may partly be due to how the two major threads of nuclear criticism read Derrida's provocative claim that global nuclear war is "a phenomenon whose essential feature is that it is *fabulously textual*, through and through."³³⁵ On the one hand, the more deconstructionist nuclear critics, though fully sympathetic with the fabulous textuality of nuclear war, largely focused their attention on post-1945 literature. On the other, for the nuclear critics more concerned with the ethical "reality" of a potential global nuclear war, who rejected, in varying degrees, the fabulous textuality of nuclear war, such a

statement about Mallarmé, Kafka, or Joyce would be as patently absurd as, one might imagine, reading the fabulous nuclear textuality of *Mason & Dixon*.

In his insightful reading of what he calls the “staged symptoms of a pretraumatic nuclear syndrome,” however, Paul K. Saint-Amour “take[s] up Derrida’s claim that pre-1945 literature might ‘seriously’ address the nuclear condition.”³³⁶ Beginning with a discussion of the residents of Hiroshima’s sense of *bukimi* prior to the Bomb being dropped,³³⁷ Saint-Amour then goes on to read Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) as a particularly illuminating pre-nuclear text: “In the advance guard of Cold War eschatology, *Ulysses*’s anticipation of a past, along with the spectral status of its characters with respect to the archive, limns the epistemological suspension, the uncanny dread, the *hysteron proteron* of the nuclear condition.”³³⁸ Though I can do little but add to Saint-Amour’s convincing reading of *Ulysses*, traumatic earliness, and the nuclear uncanny here, for the purpose of treating *Mason & Dixon* as a text that deals ‘seriously’ with the (post-)nuclear epoch, I will also briefly turn to *Ulysses*.

Near the end of the “Cyclops” chapter, Joyce inflates a fairly minor moment of violence—when the citizen throws a tin box at the departing Leopold Bloom, and misses—into an event with repercussions that are, as *The New Bloomsday Book* puts it, “prophetically, in the megaton range.”³³⁹ The resulting explosion deserves lengthy quotation:

The catastrophe was terrific and instantaneous in its effect. The observatory of Dunsink registered in all eleven shocks, all of the fifth grade of Mercalli’s scale, and there is no record extant of a similar seismic disturbance in our island since the earthquake of 1534, the year of the rebellion of Silken Thomas. The epicentre appears to have been that part of the metropolis which constitutes the Inn’s Quay ward and parish of Saint Michan covering a surface of fortyone acres, two roods and one square pole or perch. All the

lordly residences in the vicinity of the palace of justice were demolished and that noble edifice itself, in which at the time of the catastrophe important legal debates were in progress, is literally a mass of ruins beneath which it is to be feared all the occupants have been buried alive. From the reports of eyewitnesses it transpires that the seismic waves were accompanied by a violent atmospheric perturbation of cyclonic character. An article of headgear since ascertained to belong to the much respected clerk of the crown and peace Mr George Fottrell and a silk umbrella with a gold handle with the engraved initials, coat of arms and house number of the erudite and worshipful chairman of quarter sessions sir Frederick Falkiner, recorder of Dublin, have been discovered by search parties in remote parts of the island, respectively, the former on the third basaltic ridge of the giant's causeway, and the latter embedded to the extent of one foot three inches in the sandy beach of Holeopen bay near the old head of Kinsale. Other eyewitnesses depose that they observed an incandescent object of enormous proportions hurtling through the atmosphere at a terrifying velocity in a trajectory directed south west by west. Messages of condolence and sympathy are being hourly received from all parts of the different continents and the sovereign pontiff has been graciously pleased to decree that a special *missa pro defunctis* shall be celebrated simultaneously by the ordinaries of each and every cathedral church of all the episcopal dioceses subject to the spiritual authority of the Holy See in suffrage of the souls of those faithful departed who have been so unexpectedly called away from our midst.³⁴⁰

Though presumably Derrida was not thinking of this moment specifically when he threw out Joyce's name as an exemplar of "serious" engagement with the nuclear epoch—and indeed, to

really explore Derrida's claim would probably require a far less "obvious" nuclear moment—the appropriateness of this passage for the present discussion cannot be denied.

First, it needs to be emphasized that this moment does not actually occur in the "reality" of *Ulysses*' narrative space. The movement from the tin being thrown to an explosion that sends Fottrell's hat to the extreme north of Ireland, and Falkiner's umbrella to the extreme south, is hyperbolic, exaggerated, and completely imaginative. It presents a fantasmatic space of destruction, a fantasy that is thoroughly nuclear in its instantaneity, violence, and extremity. Indeed, if such a passage were to appear in a post-1945 novel, there would be no doubt about its essentially nuclear nature. Extrapolating a massive catastrophic explosion or earthquake from such a relatively minute, banal act of violence emphasizes that for Joyce there is a clear *telos* to the violence of modernity. Such a relatively innocent gesture both contains and underlies the extension of this violence to a scale beyond anything else in the world of *Ulysses*. Further, the object of this violence, Leopold Bloom, the modernist subject *par excellence*—who also shortly transforms into Elijah or perhaps Christ apocalyptically descending from heaven—is *missed*. The thrown tin box functions as a letter that cannot reach its destination. Bloom, the target of violence, both dissipates as a subject, and is reified into an iconographic messianic figure emptied of any spiritual or meaningful content. The destruction carried out by the citizen against a specific target that threatens the citizen's very integrity results in the unintended breakdown of the law and the State, the very structures that permitted the citizen to be a *citizen* in the first place. (A kind of MAD.) And of course the real work only begins in the ruins and aftermath of the event, in the "work of salvage," the removal of debris and human remains. As has become so familiar with contemporary catastrophic events—Katrina, Haiti, Fukushima, etc.—"condolences and sympathy are being hourly received from all parts of the different continents." The

interconnectivity of a global communications network immediately broadcasting the catastrophe, making the catastrophe always already global (in a sense), is prefigured in Joyce, and gets expressed in an international *missa de profunctis*, or requiem for the dead. Indeed, it is virtually impossible to read the above without noting Joyce's prescience (even to the extent that later in the paragraph he anticipates the flowering of acronyms that would accompany the establishment and growth of the military-industrial complex).

As Saint-Amour argues, this and other moments from *Ulysses* convey something that is unmistakably nuclear.³⁴¹ Not merely because "the catastrophe was terrific and instantaneous," but also because what gets truly destroyed, "the palace of justice," is a wholly archival institution. What is threatened, more immediately than even human bodies or survival, is an archival site. Only the relatively unnecessary accoutrements of modern life (a hat and umbrella) undergo violent spatial displacement. But the primary "mass of ruins" is the center of juridical power. The persistence of coherent laws and State power absolutely depend upon the presence and maintenance of the historical, juridical archive in order to function. The Joycean imagination, long before the explosions at Alamogordo, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki, understands that "the uniqueness of nuclear war. . . even if it remains a decoy, a belief, a phantasmatic projection, is obviously the possibility of an irreversible destruction, leaving no traces of the juridico-literary archive and therefore the basis of literature and criticism."³⁴² Bloom's descent from the heavens following the explosion can only be read as a parody of the apocalyptic mode: "an absolute self-destructibility without apocalypse, without revelation of its own truth, without absolute knowledge."³⁴³ Joyce, in this moment, forecloses literature as vehicle for revelation—apocalyptic or otherwise, which is something *The Crying of Lot 49* further explores—and nothing but *Ulysses*' own precariousness as an archival object is left, attempting to overcome its

own disappearance from history, its deletion from the archive, its de(con)struction of tradition.³⁴⁴

That the language of this nuclear moment acts through a desperate proliferation of signs and inscriptions, producing meaningless acronyms designating those whose role it is to salvage the ruins of modernity (“Hercules Hannibal Habeas Corpus Anderson K.G. . . .”)—this can be historically projected both forward and backward as an awareness that perhaps the only way of staving off such a disaster lies in a flurry of archival and linguistic production (something like Ethelmer’s fabulistic history). If we have perhaps never been modern, in the final pages of “Cyclops” we have always already been post-nuclear.

This striking intersection between state power, the juridical archive, and Joyce’s “traditional accent of the ecstasy of catastrophe,”³⁴⁵ along with the parodic proliferation of bureaucratic functionaries overseeing the aftermath of the disaster, displays a deep unease with biopolitical power that Pynchon very much shares, and interrogates to the *n*th degree over the course of his career. As he writes in his brief essay, “Is it O.K. to be a Luddite?”: “Since Hiroshima, we have watched nuclear weapons multiply out of control, and delivery systems acquire, for global purposes, unlimited range and accuracy. An unblinking acceptance of a holocaust running to seven- and eight-figure body counts has become—among those who, particularly since 1980, have been guiding our military policies—conventional wisdom.”³⁴⁶ In *Mason & Dixon*, this conventional wisdom of the US government (and the Reagan administration), its unblinking acceptance of and teleological drive toward mega-death, its technocratic, biopolitical population mathematics of destruction is prefigured through one of the novel’s discussions of the American landscape and Benjamin Franklin.

In Chapter 50 of *Mason & Dixon*, in which Dixon stumbles upon the tavern “The Rabbi of Prague, headquarters of a Kabbalistick Faith,”³⁴⁷ a discussion about the Line and the coming

revolution takes place amongst the inn's patrons. The discovery of the "new world," for the various Kabbalists talking to Dixon, made it clear that "'By the time of Columbus, God's project of Disengagement was obvious to all,— with the terrible understanding that we were left more and more to our own solutions.' / 'America, withal, for centuries had been *kept hidden*, as are certain Bodies of Knowledge.'"³⁴⁸ The North American landscape is a text, harboring a secret body of knowledge to Dixon's interlocutors, and is "'meant to be studied with the same dedication as the Hebrew Kabbala would demand.'" As Dixon "may imagine, [they] take a lively interest in this Line of [his . . .] inasmuch as it may be read, East to West, much as a Line of Text upon a Page of the sacred Torah [. . .] 'Twill terminate somewhere to the West, no one, not even [Mason], knows where. An utterance. A message of uncertain length, apt to be interrupted at any Moment or Chain."³⁴⁹ The Mason-Dixon Line, for these hermeneutists, inscribes further writing upon the already textual landscape. In the wake of God's disengagement, the secret of the new world becomes available to interpretation, and to read the Line written on the landscape is to approach some hidden secret.

Recall, however, Cherrycoke's invective against linear history, in which any single break in the chain of a monumental (rather than fabulistic) national history threatens everyone with destruction. The Line that Mason and Dixon wrote upon the landscape through an interpretation of light harbors the potential to be extended west indefinitely. Consequently, to read the Line *as* a (Euclidean) line, as something that will continue both temporally and spatially, cannot be done. The Kabbalists are here quite aware of their own inability to read the Line and whatever secret knowledge it harbors. Linear, teleological, diachronic history, the kind of history that can be broken, "apt to be interrupted at any Moment," contains a secret unavailable to traditional forms of theological and textual interpretation. The inheritor of the secret knowledge, then, is not the

Kabbalists, the preterit Dixon, nor Cherrycoke as-historian-against-the-grain, but rather Benjamin Franklin, and specifically the Franklin of the *Autobiography* who seeks moral perfection through his “Method for conducting that Examination”³⁵⁰: his famous schedule that effectively secularized the Puritan work ethic in the service of capitalist growth. For Franklin’s personal schedule, his method for approaching moral perfection, is a thoroughly linear sense of individual history, and in the wake of a disengaged deity, is one that readily suggests itself for the elect of Pynchon’s world.³⁵¹

Consequently, the Line’s *extension* in space and time not only signals the course of empire, Manifest Destiny, a progressivist, linear sense of history, the extermination of native cultures, the coming Civil War, the dialectic of the Enlightenment, and, if drawn far enough west, the explosions of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It is all of these things, but for the Kabbalists the Line is the manifestation of the new world’s secret knowledge *of itself*. And though Mason and Dixon may be its surveyors, reading the above heavens to inscribe the Earth below, they, nor the Kabbalists, are its audience:

“Another case of, ‘As above, so below.’”

“No longer, Alas, a phrase of Power,— this Age sees a corruption and disabling of the ancient Magick. Projectors, Brokers of Capital, Insurancers, Peddlers upon the global Scale, Enterprisers and Quacks,— these are the last poor and fallen and feckless inheritors of a Knowledge they can never use, but in the service of Greed. The coming Rebellion is theirs,— Franklin, and that Lot,— and Heaven help the *rest of us* [emphasis mine], if they prevail.”

[. . .]

“Eh?— for they esteem Franklin a Magician. A Figure of Power. *We* know what he is,— but to the Mobility, he is the Ancestor of Miracles,— or, of Wonders, which pass as well with them,— without which, indeed, they would soon grow inquisitive and troublesome. For, as long as it remains possible to keep us deluded that we are ‘free men,’ we back Inhabitants will feed the Metropolis, open new roads to it, fight in its behalf,³⁵²— we may be Presbyterian today, and turn’d only by the force of God, but after very few seasons of such remorseless Gulling, we must be weak and tractable enough even for the Philadelphian men of affairs, who themselves cannot be reckon’d as any sort of Faithful, but rather among Doubt’s advancing Phalanx,— of whom one must ask, If they no longer believe in Bishops, where next, might their Irreverence not take them?”³⁵³

One of the most powerful indictments of the origins of the nation and the myth of the founding fathers in the novel, these Kabbalists make it clear that “Franklin, and that Lot” are the inheritors of the secret of the new world. Access to this secret can only express itself in capitalist expansion (nodding as well to Reagan’s Friedmanian free-market economic policies). The echo of the threat “the rest of us” feel in the face of The Bomb from the introduction to *Slow Learner* here is projected backward and reads the American Revolution purely in terms of power and capital. The delusion of “freedom” merely serves the (secular) elect of “Franklin and that Lot” in order to, “against the Day,”³⁵⁴ wage war.

Benjamin Franklin plays many roles in *Mason & Dixon*. But more than the historical, mythical, or Pynchonian Franklin—all versions deserving of attention—the Kabbalistic Franklin plays a kind of secular wizard, an instantiation of scientific thought, a capturer of lightning. (As the fictional epic poem quoted throughout the novel, *The Pennsylvaniad*, puts it: “‘The Kite, the Key, the mortal Thundering / As Heaven’s Flame assaults the hempen String.’”³⁵⁵) Franklin’s

interpretation of the “secret” of the new world presents itself as miracles and wonders, but *we* know, the scholars, that the final question in the above passage should be taken seriously. Where does this kind of “irreverence” take them? What is more irreverent than threatening to destroy the world? (For there is no *telos* to the Kabbalists’ question.) In this fashion Pynchon writes the Bomb directly into the history *Mason & Dixon* purports to represent as a teleological destination for science and secularization, and as a projection into the past of the basic power the state will have over the species’ future. The beginning of American juridical power, on the eve of the Constitutional Congress, instantiates the narrative of the Bomb’s eventual history, a history intimately tied to the state. Marrying politics with technology in the American political imagination, this narrative, for the Kabbalists who can “read” it, is a linear narrative without end, or perhaps even any event.

Pynchon’s project throughout *Mason & Dixon* is thus clear vis-à-vis the Bomb: to write a different kind of history for the hermeneutists to read. There is more in the textual, material, and historical world than merely resources to be instrumentally exploited, atoms split for war, what Heidegger calls “standing reserve.” Further, as Pynchon makes clear through his portrayal of both Mason and Dixon, science is not excluded out of hand from this historical task. They study the phenomenon of light, and throughout the novel it resists their attempts to objectify it. To write light, to interpret something that is both particle and wave, to understand things like the solar parallax, the traversal of Venus, light’s aberration, etc., requires of them a non-instrumentalizing awareness. Mason and Dixon are thus deeply engaged in the work of Pynchonian imagination. Requiring the same sense of fabulism that Cherrycoke’s historian demands, their study of light produces strikingly complex narrative and poetic moments.

Though there are many points that deserve considerable attention with regard to manifestations of luminous textuality throughout the novel,³⁵⁶ the final two pages are particularly suggestive:

“Whilst I’m of use [. . .] they shan’t seek my dissolution, not in the thick of this Dispute over the Bradley Obs so-call’d, these being many of them, my own. No one wants to repeat what went on between Newton and Flamsteed. Excepting perhaps one of Kabbalistick Turn, who believes those Arrays of Numerals to be the magical Text that will deliver him to Immortality. Or suspects that Bradley *found something*, something as important as the Abberation, but more ominous,— some-thing France may not have, or not right away, and Jesuits must not learn of, ever,— something so useful and deadly, that rather than publish his suspicions, or even reduce the *data* any further, Bradley simply left them as an exercise for anyone strongly enough interested. And what could that be? *What Phantom Shape, implicit in the Figures?*”³⁵⁷

Mason, on his death bed, is discussing eighteenth century astronomer James Bradley, who in 1725 observed that, rather than trace small individually distinct ellipses in the night sky, as could be expected for parallax, the stars traced identical ellipses. These identical ellipses implied that all the stars were the same distance from the earth, producing quite the controversy as it threatened a regression to geo-centrism. To explain this aberration Bradley realized that the velocity of the earth itself changed the apparent position of the star being observed. Even though the earth’s velocity is relatively minor in relation to the speed of light, Bradley’s observations led him to conclude that the speed of light is thus *finite*. Consequently, to “see” any particular star, you have to look slightly to the side of the star’s “true” location. In drawing our attention to Bradley’s aberration of light, Pynchon is giving Mason many roles here.

First, Mason is bemoaning his basic function in the novel: someone tasked to interpret how light functions in the heavens in order to draw a line upon the Earth. If one can never see a star's "true" position, if one is forced to look awry at the side of an object to be able to "see" it, then Mason, in these final moments realizes his hopeless failure to glimpse anything resembling the truth. His task, to trace a specific geometry on the earth, is ultimately grounded upon light's inexplicable behavior. Consequently, material reality itself cannot be understood within the world of *Mason & Dixon* without engaging in some amount of fabulous counterfeiting, and any final revelation of the world, let alone history, is withheld. (The structure of the novel's presentation of an alternate history can also be understood as Pynchon's own highly mediated and bent engagement with light.)

More importantly, however, is Mason's conjecture that Bradley may have "*found something*." This thing, "something so useful and deadly" that France may not have right away, and the Jesuits may never have, should be read as The Bomb. (Recall that France did not test a nuclear weapon until 1960, and Italy has yet to. But it is also "an exercise for anyone strongly enough interested.") Consequently, it is important to recall that the problem presented by Bradley's aberration would not be satisfactorily explained until Albert Einstein's formulation of general relativity:

According to the general theory of relativity, the geometrical properties of space are not independent, but they are determined by matter. Thus we can draw conclusions about the geometrical structure of the universe only if we base our considerations on the state of the matter as being something that is known. We know from experience that, for a suitably chosen co-ordinate system, the velocities of the stars are small as compared with the velocity of transmission of light. We can thus as a rough approximation arrive at a

conclusion as to the nature of the universe as a whole, if we treat matter as being at rest.³⁵⁸

The phantom shape implicit in Bradley's (secret) figures can thus be read as the emerging shape of modern, post-relativistic physics itself, as it roughly approximates "the nature of the universe as a whole." General relativity, which understands that gravity is a geometric property of space-time, and that the curvature of space-time is a direct result of the energy and momentum of whatever matter and radiation are present, is here prefigured in Mason's dying words. To explain why the actual position of stars were slightly different than where we see them requires understanding that gravity bends the curvature of space-time, and light follows that curve. The "phantom shape in the figures" is thus a host of different things: the flaws in our understanding of the world as defined by Newtonian mechanics, Einstein's general theory of relativity, *Gravity's Rainbow* itself, the foundation of the science that would lead to the Bomb, etc. Mason's interpretation of Bradley is not only a prophetic accounting of the future of theoretical physics, but of the history that would accompany and be directly shaped by its development.

Further describing this emerging shape, Mason says,

" 'Tis a Construction [. . .] a great single Engine, the size of a Continent. I have all the proofs you may require. Not all the Connexions are made yet, that's why some of it is still invisible. Day by day the Pioneers and Surveyors go on, more points are being tied in, and soon becoming visible, as above, new Stars are recorded and named and plac'd in Almanacks. . . ."³⁵⁹

In Mason's dying words, Bradley's observations become a vast metaphor for the futurity that Pynchon is writing his post-Cold War novel in the wake of. The construction the size of a continent, quite clearly, is the vast undiscovered territory of modern physics. But it is also US

history itself, both as something to be constructed, and something emerging from the great single engine of modernity: Adams's dynamo. For Pynchon Hiroshima is, in a concrete as well as a fabulously textual sense, the most *visible* manifestation of these various phantom shapes, and plays a significant role in the historical background of *Mason & Dixon* and all of his fiction, whether that fiction be explicitly nuclear or not. In short, The Bomb *is* the phantom shape implicit in the figures of *Mason & Dixon*.

3.4 HISTORICAL LUMINOSITY: CRYSTALLIZING NARRATIVE TEMPORALITY IN *AGAINST THE DAY*

The third section of *Against the Day*, "Bilocations," opens: "While the *Inconvenience* was in New York, Lindsay [Noseworth] had heard rumors of a 'Turkish Corner' that really *was* supposed, in some not strictly metaphorical way, to provide an 'escape nook to Asia.'"³⁶⁰ Throughout Pynchon's longest novel, in some not strictly metaphorical way, escape nooks to alternate realities, other temporalities,³⁶¹ dreams, parallel worlds, and Slothropian Zones proliferate.³⁶² Set between the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 and the post-World War I era of 1923, *Against the Day* multiplies *Mason & Dixon*'s non-linear treatment of history through a proliferation of narrative threads that, when woven together, create a dizzyingly complex encyclopedic novel that continually questions its own relationship to history, time, and narrative.

At the heart of these questions is Lindsay Noseworth's suspicion "that light might be a *secret determinant of history*."³⁶³ Though any discussion of Pynchon that attempts to schematize his novels threatens massive over-simplification (and oftentimes downright misreading), one might broadly suggest that, while *Mason & Dixon* frequently approaches light as an ultimately

unknowable object given to hermeneutic activity, in *Against the Day* light becomes a *material force* determining and tying together the novel's multi-layered narrative. For Mason and Dixon and the Newtonian universe they (unsuccessfully try to) inhabit, the paradoxes and aporias of light are largely problems of space. In *Against the Day*, however, light's behavior is confounding spatially *and* temporally.³⁶⁴ In other words, relativity, which was merely implicit in the figures of *Mason & Dixon*'s universe, fully emerges as a lens through which to understand how Pynchon constructs his luminous narratology of space-time in *Against the Day*.³⁶⁵

As important critic of postmodern literature Brian McHale has perceptively noted, "*Against the Day* is, among other things, a massive anthology of popular genres—a virtual library of entertainment fiction," adding that the novel refines Pynchon's "practice of what we might call *mediated historiography*—the writing of an era's history through the medium of its popular genres [. . .] captur[ing] the way a historical epoch represented itself *to* itself."³⁶⁶ Pynchon's remediation³⁶⁷ of a great many novelistic genres of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries in *Against the Day*³⁶⁸ continually foregrounds and questions narrative's relationship to time and history, sharing Paul Ricoeur's "thesis [. . .] that speculation on time is an inconclusive rumination to which narrative activity alone can respond."³⁶⁹ Significantly vis-à-vis Ricoeur, however, *Against the Day*, through its remediation of popular genres, elides, obfuscates, or complicates other historically significant ways that the historical epoch of the early twentieth century represented itself to itself: namely, literary modernism. The novel is obviously concerned throughout with the crises of modernity: the violence of European imperialism,³⁷⁰ the increasingly brutal realities of an emerging multinational capitalism, and the imminence of the First World War. *Against the Day*'s mobilization of a plethora of popular genres, however, does not signal that it is engaged in some kind of anti-modernist (or even

postmodernist), revisionist rewriting of the early twentieth century, but rather that its relationship to time and modern crisis, and thus eschatology as well, is engaged in a significantly different, crystalline project of thinking about the relationship between time and narrative than Ricoeur's reading of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg* (1924), and Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-1927).³⁷¹

Ricoeur opens the second volume of his masterful three volume study, *Time and Narrative*, with a discussion of narrative ends. Drawing upon Frank Kermode and Northrop Frye, Ricoeur writes:

Apocalypse can thus signify both the end of the world and the end of the book at the same time. This congruence between world and the book extends further. The beginning of the book is about the beginning and the end of the book is about the end. [. . .] In this way, the eschatological myth and the Aristotelian muthos are joined together in their way of tying a beginning to an ending and proposing to the imagination the triumph of concordance over discordance. [. . .] The apocalypse, therefore, shifts its imagery from the last days, the days of terror, of decadence, of renovation, to become a myth of crisis.³⁷²

This move from Biblical apocalypse to the modern narrative of crisis was initiated, according to Ricoeur, in Elizabethan tragedy; and this is precisely what the modern novel narrates: the reconfiguration of time which occurs again and again in modernity is precisely the crisis of temporality itself, its aporias, problems, etc., which narrative serves to reconcile. For the modernist novels of Woolf, Mann, and Proust that Ricoeur concerns himself with, however, this occurs in a mode significantly different to pre-modern narrative eschatology. This shift from teleology and eschatology to perpetual crisis in modern narrative, in what Ricoeur calls a "fictive

experience [of time,] has to do with a different dimension of the literary work than the one we are considering here, namely, its power to *project a world*.”³⁷³ This power to project a world makes the fictional narrative a privileged mode of a “‘tale of time,’ or better yet, as a ‘tale about time.’”³⁷⁴ In other words, when what Ricoeur calls mimesis₂³⁷⁵ functions as a narrative about time rather than simply as Aristotelian *muthos* in the classical sense, *time becomes the subject of narrative itself*. In doing so, the tension between *Erzählzeit* (time of narrating) and the *erzählte Zeit* (narrated time) creates a multiplicity of modes of constructing these narratives, as well as narrating or refiguring time—i.e. Ricoeur is clear to note how his examples are all incredibly different in how they construct the time of the narrative and how time gets narrated. Ultimately, what erupts into these tales about time is what he calls *historical time*, that which will join together what he calls “objective time” and “phenomenological time” in volume three of *Time and Narrative*.³⁷⁶ These modernist narratives cannot help but to confront, in becoming narratives about time, the intrusion of historical (i.e. not eschatological) time into any fictional narrative.

What occurs in Pynchon’s narrative engagement with time in *Against the Day*, however, is something significantly different than simply the intrusion of historical time into his narrative (though of course this does occur). Fredric Jameson, in his famous essay on postmodernism, has argued that the postmodern turn concerns a shift from the temporal concerns of modernism—i.e. Ricoeur’s reading of Woolf *et al*—to spatial concerns:

[T]his latest mutation in space—postmodern hyperspace—has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world. It may now be suggested that this alarming disjunction point between the body and its built environment—which is to the initial bewilderment of the older

modernism as the velocities of spacecraft to those of the automobile—can itself stand as the symbol and analagon of that even sharper dilemma which is the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects.³⁷⁷

Jameson's argument is compelling and has been highly important for theorizing the postmodern. With regard to Pynchon, however, to make the argument that his postmodernism is a result of this shift would be to ignore his basic obsession with physics, specifically Einstein's theory of relativity. For Pynchon, there is no gap between space and time; it is always space-time. Nowhere is this more apparent than in *Against the Day*.

And this is incredibly important for the manner in which the novel reinhabits, reinscribes, and rewrites the crisis of modernity, or modernity's formulation of crisis. For Ricoeur, the aporia of time was already thoroughly formulated in St. Augustine's *Confessions*: "the skeptical argument is well-known: time has no being since the future is not yet, the past no longer, and present does not remain. And yet we do speak of time as having being. [. . .] How can time exist if the past is no longer, if the future is not yet, and if the present is not always?"³⁷⁸ One of Ricoeur's principal aims in *Time and Narrative* is to reconcile the aporias of time—that it appears to exist, to have being—by combining the Augustinian aporia with Aristotle's sense of narrative from the *Poetics*. For Ricoeur, the absence of any theory of narrative in Augustine or a theory of time in Aristotle permits and necessitates the combination of these two thinkers to understand time and narrative as indissolubly linked—i.e. neither can be understood in isolation without the other. In short, "*time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence.*"³⁷⁹ For many writers Ricoeur's thinking would be more than sufficient to account for

the relationship between time and narrative in their work. But Ricoeur is, at the end of the day, operating amidst a fairly Newtonian world-view of temporality, no matter how complex his discussions of universal time and historical time may be.³⁸⁰ In short, for Ricoeur, it is thinking through the *being* of time that produces aporias. For Pynchon, the aporia presented by relativity is that time *may not exist*—i.e. it *may have no being whatsoever*.³⁸¹

As Ricoeur acknowledges near the end of the third volume of *Time and Narrative*: “There comes a moment, in a work devoted to the power of narrative to elevate time to language, where we must admit that narrative is not the whole story and that time *can be spoken in other ways*, because, even for narrative, it remains inscrutable.”³⁸² In *Against the Day*, Pynchonian time often speaks in different ways than those considered by Ricoeur. And to get an inkling of what I mean by this requires a brief detour (through a path that is, admittedly, not explicitly suggested by the novel).

In Kurt Gödel’s brief and largely unknown work on relativity, “A Remark About the Relationship Between Relativity Theory and Idealistic Philosophy” (he was of course famous as a mathematician and not as a physicist), published in the book, *Albert Einstein: Philosopher-Scientist*, occasioned by Einstein’s seventieth birthday, he comes to a quite surprising conclusion. As Palle Yourgrau details in his fascinating account of the forgotten relationship between Einstein and Gödel, who were both at Princeton’s Institute for Advanced Study during the 1940s and were good friends, Gödel provides a proof that “if relativity theory is valid, intuitive *time disappears*.”³⁸³ As Yourgrau provides a much better summation of the problems regarding relativistic time than I could briefly summarize, I will quote at length:

The problem Gödel inherited from Einstein had been understood for centuries to concern the most fundamental aspect of human experience [time]. [. . .] With the advent of

Einstein's theory of relativity, however, the mystery of this form of being was widely taken to have been solved. Philosophers could finally relax. Einstein had taken care of business.

Appearances, however, can be deceptive. The universe, for example, as everyone knows, is very old. Its exact age is a matter for debate, but there is no disagreement that it runs to billions of years. [. . .] In truth, however, it is more than marvelous to have discovered the age of the universe. *It is impossible*. For if the universe is n years old, its present state comes n years after the moment when it all began. In 1905, however, Einstein had demonstrated in the special theory of relativity that there is no such thing as “the present state of the universe,” that is, what would be revealed by a snapshot of the universe as it exists at this very moment. The relativity of simultaneity implies that what is taken to be “now” relative to one inertial frame will differ from what is “now” in another frame if the second frame is in motion relative to the first. It follows immediately that if the theory of relativity is correct, there simply is *no such thing* as “the present state of the universe” of four-dimensional space-time. Einstein himself said this quite clearly: “The four-dimensional continuum is now no longer resolvable objectively into sections, all of which contain simultaneous events; ‘now’ loses for the spatially extended world its objective meaning.”³⁸⁴

Gödel's engagement with this problem, as in his famous incompleteness theorem where he demonstrated the incompleteness of systems in reality through demonstrating the incompleteness of all and any formal systems, was to demonstrate the complete distinction between the intuitive and formal (subjective and objective) concepts of relativistic time; in other words, he demonstrates the incommensurability between what we “experience” as time (or calendrical

time) and time as understood by the formal explanation of relativity. Through a small number of brilliant steps Gödel arrives at the conclusion that, because he can prove that time does not exist in his purely formal/theoretical construction—his formal-speculative universe in which time travel is theoretically possible (what is now called the “Gödel universe”)—therefore, according to his proof, time does not exist in *our* universe. In short, because time travel is formally or theoretically possible in a very different universe than our own, though one still defined by relativity, time does not exist *anywhere*. “The final step is taken; the curtain comes down: time really does disappear.”³⁸⁵

As Yourgrau repeatedly points out, Gödel’s short article on relativity has been ignored by physicists (probably because he was a mathematician, dabbling in something he did not “understand”) and philosophers alike. I would like to suggest, however, that whether knowingly or not, the fabric of Pynchonian space-time in *Against the Day* narratologically explores many of the implication of Gödel’s largely unacknowledged and profound conclusions.

As so many of Pynchon’s long novels begin, the first line of *Against the Day*—““Now single up all the lines!””³⁸⁶—already betrays certain ruptures and failures of the narrative, as well as certain aspects of the novel’s trajectory. Just as “A screaming comes across the sky” and “Snow balls have flown their Arcs” immediately project certain kinds of ends—the Rocket approaching its asymptote at the end of *Gravity’s Rainbow* and the end of the Cold War, respectively—this call to single up the lines, to braid them together into something cohesive and linear, betrays the simple fact that no account of *Against the Day*’s narrative, let alone the world it is about to project, can be “singled up.”

Opening during the 1893 World’s Fair (so significant for Henry Adams’s *Education*) with the Chums of Chance descending on Chicago in their air-machine, the novel immediately

confronts its readers with problems of space-time that merely an “alternate” or “fantastic” history would not afford. The Chums, as the narrative proceeds, literally travel through time, travel to an “alternate world” hidden by the sun (our own. . .), find themselves at many of the significant historical moments both before and during World War I, and are fictitious characters that are fictitious within the novel itself (i.e. Reef Traverse actually reads one of the novels of their adventures). In this sense, the Chums are complex Pynchonian agents and/or subjects of history. Indeed, as McHale suggests,

The Chums receive special treatment because they have been reserved for a special destiny. In a novel so invested in tracing the buildup to the Great War, and so relentless in foreshadowing it, it is only from the perspective of the Chums that we witness the war in present time. Whereas other characters [. . .] *flash back* to their Great War experiences after the fact, in retrospective, only the Chums are permitted to reflect the war experience *as it happens* [. . .]. The paradox is powerful: Pynchon reserves for the most lightweight of all the genres he poaches [. . .] the mission of bearing witness to the weightiest, the gravest, of historical catastrophes.³⁸⁷

As experienced by the Chums, then, both history and time present themselves in the novel as open and fluid, bespeaking a sense of space-time that is inextricably linked at all moments. In a quite real sense, then, the linear, diachronic succession of time that is anathema to most Pynchonian worlds here can be understood in terms of the geometrical and gravitational implications of relativity. Each moment in *Against the Day* cannot be captured within an inertial frame without referencing many other frames that are constantly changing and in motion. The novel’s continual references to the cyclicity of history and Nietzsche’s notion of the Eternal Return signal less a kind of Yeatsian notion of time or a narrative structure akin to Joyce’s

Finnegan's Wake (1939), than, for lack of a better term, a “Gödelian history,” a history whose parameters cannot be understood diachronically, nor temporally at all.

To give one example among many of how Pynchon might be said to be projecting what I am calling a Gödelian history, immediately before the Chums encounter Iceland spar for the first time, a mythical crystal that allows one to read reality differently than it appears, a significant disagreement about the linearity of temporality takes place in a meeting of the Transnoctial Discussion Group.³⁸⁸

“We learned once how to break horses and ride them for long distances, with oceangoing ships we left flat surfaces and went into Riemann space, we crossed solid land and deep seas, and colonized what we found,” said Dr. Vormance. [. . .] “And what of colonizing dimensions beyond the third? Colonize Time. Why not?”

“Because, sir,” objected Dr. Templeton Blope, of the University of the Outer Hebrides, “—we are limited to three.”

[. . .]

“Time moves on but one axis,” advised Dr. Blope, “past to future—the only turnings possible being turns of a hundred and eighty degrees. In the Quaternions, a ninety-degree direction would correspond to an *additional axis* whose unit is $\sqrt{-1}$. A turn through any other angle would require for its unit a complex number.”

“Yet mappings in which a linear axis becomes curvilinear—functions of a complex variable such as $w=e^z$, where a straight line in the z -plane maps to a circle in the w -plane,” said Dr. Rao, “do suggest the possibility of linear time becoming circular, and so achieving eternal return as simply, or should I say as complexly, as that.”³⁸⁹

Keeping in mind that this discussion is ostensibly set before Einstein's publication of his theory of special relativity in 1905, this debate between an explanation of space-time as three dimensional and the notion of multiple, parallel dimensions expressing themselves in relativistic geometries, mappable through Riemannian equations, is dependent upon a relativistic notion of light. And the Chums are in fact about to travel along an additional 90° axis, perpendicular to the narrative itself, *through space-time*, across the night, against the day.

The Chums' ability to bend themselves through the fabric of Pynchon's very world as light is bent through space is why light bears the weight of the novel's history, both in metaphorical and literal terms. The Chums bear witness to history, to the horrors of the First World War and what could ostensibly be called the present (or contemporary). They also bear witness to certain notions of history: Nietzsche's Eternal Return, Yeats's widening gyre, and Benjamin's reading of Klee's *Angelus Novus* (1920), in which the angel "turned toward the past [. . .] sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet."³⁹⁰ It is their discovery of the archive on their journey to the North Pole that allows them to bear such witness.

Nodding to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), in which Victor, the monster, and Walton all construct the North Pole as a teleological destination, after leaving the Discussion group on their way to the pole the Chums discover

the great Library of Iceland behind the translucent green walls facing the sunlit sea. Some of these spaces were workshops or mess-halls, some centers of operation, stacked to the top of the great cliff, easily a dozen levels, probably more. Among the library shelves could be found *The Book of Iceland Spar*, commonly described as "like the *Ynglingasaga* only different," containing family histories going back to the first discovery and

exploitation of the eponymic mineral up to the present, including a record of each day of this very Expedition now in progress, even of *days not yet transpired*.

“Fortune-telling! Impossible!”

“Unless we can allow that certain texts are—“

“Outside of time,” suggested one of the Librarians.³⁹¹

The Chums encounter a massive “secret library” beyond the reaches of the “known world” that is structured as a *crystal*. Containing what appears to be an entire infrastructure attached to it, everything from mundane living quarters and “mess halls,” to a whole bureaucratic apparatus and multiple centers of operation, the library’s highly organized community is all designed around housing *The Book of Iceland Spar*. This book is “the genuine article, and the sub-structure of reality. The doubling of the Creation, each image clear and believable And you being mathematical gentleman, it can hardly have escaped your attention that its curious advent into the world occurred within only a few years of the discovery of Imaginary Numbers, which also provided a doubling of the mathematical Creation.”³⁹² To read history, to bear witness to the atrocities of the past, present, and future, the Chums must read *The Book of Iceland Spar* with a piece of Iceland spar, on Iceland in a library whose walls are built out of Iceland spar. This book only appeared after the mathematical revolution of theorizing imaginary numbers, creating a further temporal doubling of the book’s spatiality. There are clearly more than two (or three) dimensions at play here, both narratively and historically. The metafictional multiplication of the lenses through which the primary text gets read, or whatever light the *ur*-text emits, allows the Chums the chance to step *outside of time*, into a non-time, where they can see a Gödelian history unfold, refracted through multiple crystalline structures, both within the narrative and extra-diegetically. These crystals refract and are refracted by the multiple other genre modes in the

novel and “reality” as well. This hyperarchive of history, time, and narrative when bent through the crystal of the Chums’ agency, creates a kind of *archival time*. History and space-time can only be perceived by humans in *Against the Day* through refraction. As light is bent through the apparatus to enable the chums to read space-time, the distortions of what they read must be re-refracted by the structure of the library itself.

In many ways then, I think Pynchon is inviting us to read the entirety of *Against the Day* as his attempt to create a perspective on history in which time does not exist. Rather than submit to Fukuyama’s notion of time in which it is *history* that is over and is now quickly being forgotten, Pynchon’s texts project a world, quite simply, in which time simply is not there and history is all we have; we can only experience history through its narrative and the archive which allows it to exist. If the mode of reading the archive, of the archive writing, through the refraction of light, is to submit oneself to the writing of history as well, it is because, as one of the Chums puts it, the novel aspires, ““to know light [. . .] I want to reach inside light and find its heart, touch its soul, take some in my hands whatever it turns out to be, and bring it back, like the Gold Rush only more at stake, maybe ’cause it’s easier to go crazy from, there’s danger in every direction, deadlier than snakes or fever or claim jumpers—.”³⁹³ The refraction of genres and temporalities, the fantasmatic threads Pynchon refuses to single up, project the historical thrust of the dynamo: to capture electricity, to single up the threads of force. But more than attempting to master matter or electro-magnetism, *modernity’s project is conceived throughout the novel as an attempt to capture light*. As John Canady productively explores in his study of the relationship between literary expression and the quantum physics that led to the Manhattan Project and The Bomb, the imagination of modern physicists was obsessed with the problem of light—i.e. whether it was a particle or wave. Light presented itself as a still-unknown, something beyond

the futile reach of our hands. But not only would the capture of this light lead to nuclear physics, but, as Chum of Chance Roswell puts it, “the future of light is, in particular the moving pictures. The public loves those movies, can’t get enough of ’em, maybe that’s another disease of the mind, but as long as nobody finds a cure for it, the Sherriff will have to keep settling for traildust in my case.”³⁹⁴ The power of light is not only destructive, but absorptive, controlling, and epidemiological. For Pynchon, power over light becomes power over history.

In Pynchon, the more-than-Promethean quest after light during modernity resulted, quite simply, in the technology of the novel’s contemporary moment: the millions of miles of fiber-optic cable through which the internet flows,³⁹⁵ the mirrors that allowed nuclear fission to occur and thus heat up the Cold War with the threat of thermonuclear conflagration,³⁹⁶ to the LED’s on virtually everything, the high definition television, etc.—postmodernity communicates itself through highly complex optical technology. Pynchon’s exploration of the *optical society*, not simply the society of the panoptic spectacle, but of the fiberoptic cable and wireless internet—what Gilles Deleuze calls the “control society”³⁹⁷ or others the “network society”³⁹⁸—is everywhere a challenge to articulate a different relationship to time. Not the universe of clocks, “there to glorify and celebrate one particular sort of time [. . .] vulnerable to the force of gravity,” but a force that would ““Make gravity impervious to time? Why?”³⁹⁹ The call to single up the lines in *Against the Day* gets expressed as an attempt to articulate an alternative historical trajectory, an escape velocity that would make gravity impervious to time. Rather than *Gravity’s Rainbow*’s final asymptotic singularity, a black hole capturing the escaping light of the novel, *Against the Day*, by multiplying lines of flight, travels “through unknown topographies of Time,”⁴⁰⁰ attempting to imagine a mode of being that can escape the optical society’s temporal capture.

And the novel ends on what is assuredly one of Pynchon's most optimistic notes. Through the course of the narrative the Chums have built a vessel not only able to achieve escape velocity from Earth's gravity, but from time. In the form of the Chums' air-ship, the *Inconvenience*,

a ship exceeding the usual three dimensions [. . .] once a vehicle of sky pilgrimage, has transformed into its own destination, where any wish that can be made is at least addressed, if not always granted. For every wish to come true would mean that in the known Creation, good unsought and uncompensated would have evolved somehow, to become at least more accessible to us. No one aboard *Inconvenience* has yet observed any sign of this. They know—Miles is certain—it is there, like an approaching rainstorm, but invisible. Soon they will see the pressure-gauge begin to fall. They will feel the turn in the wind. They will put on smoked goggles for the glory of what is coming to part the sky. They will fly toward grace.⁴⁰¹

Though obviously a gesture toward the happy ending of the genre novels Pynchon has relentlessly mined throughout the course of the novel, there is surely an absence of the kind of eschatological doom marking the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*, the ominous call of the future in *Mason & Dixon*, or the ungrounded anti-revelation of *The Crying of Lot 49*. Rather, still bearing in mind the slipperiness of Pynchonian irony, I believe we are invited to take this final moment, flying toward grace at some point in the future, quite seriously. Even going so far as to read this last sentence as a rare moment of sincerity in Pynchon, *Against the Day*'s attempts to articulate what I am calling archival time and Gödelian history should be read as an attempt to imagine the world, the species' ontological condition, and historical possibility as open, undecided, not foreclosed, its narrative not already written in nuclear light. If *Mason & Dixon* was a first step

toward a history not dominated by the grand narrative of the United States versus the Soviet Union and a call for the reassessment of the violence of American history, *Against the Day* importantly returns to some of the ground Pynchon explored in *V.*: the brutality of Western imperialism and its legacies for contemporary US foreign policy. The decade between *Mason & Dixon*, a novel Pynchon had reportedly been writing since 1975, and *Against the Day*, a decade marked by both 11 September 2001 and the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, saw the terrain of Pynchon's imagination shift from the Adamsian nightmare of nuclear power out of control, to the more localized narratives of networked resistance and alternatives to the destructive technocracy of light. *Against the Day* everywhere acknowledges that though power over light translates into power over history, this power is accessible by the imagination and the multitude. Rather than sounding a death-knell for the novel in the age of electronic media, Pynchon locates in the ongoing project of the historical novel a mode of accessing good unsought and uncompensated.

3.5 ARCHIVAL TIME: PYNCHONIAN INFORMATICS IN *THE CRYING OF LOT 49* AND *INHERENT VICE*

[R]ecording, filing and memorizing everything of our own past and the past of all cultures. Is this not a symptom of a collective presentiment of the end, a sign that events and the living time of history have had their day and that we have to arm ourselves with the whole battery of artificial memory, all the signs of the past, to face up to the absence of a future and the glacial times which await us?

—Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*⁴⁰²

The Crying of Lot 49 has long been understood as a text that withholds any and all apocalyptic closure, or else that its lack of revelation—the fact that there is no way of knowing whether or not Oedipa Maas is capable of knowing anything or not—is precisely what is revealed.⁴⁰³

Inherent Vice on the other hand—which can in many productive ways be considered the middle novel in a California Trilogy (beginning with *The Crying of Lot 49* and concluding with *Vineland*)—ends with something like a moment of prescient, if modest and secular, revelation.

Set in Los Angeles during the summer of 1970,⁴⁰⁴ presumably a few years after Oedipa attempted to sort out Pierce Inverarity's will, Pynchon's most recent novel, and second shortest behind *The Crying of Lot 49*, returns to the fertile field of detective metafiction, upping the ante on Oedipa's accidental house-wife-turned-detective, with a professional—if usually stoned—private investigator as its protagonist. Doc Sportello is a detective thoroughly hard-boiled in late-1960s psychedelia, who, despite being another Pynchonian schlemihl, often shows Odyssean (if often unintentional) levels of craftiness. Like Oedipa, Doc stumbles upon a vast conspiracy—the Golden Fang—that (like the Tristero) may not in fact exist. Doc is introduced to this mystery while chasing rumors of real-estate developer Mickey Wolfmann around Los Angeles, who, with the exception of an important scene in a Las Vegas casino, remains an absent Inverarity-like figure of late-capitalism hovering on the edges of the narrative. After choosing to give all his money away, trying to undo the evils of his capitalist accumulation, betting “he can make the money start to flow a different direction,”⁴⁰⁵ Wolfmann then disappears, presumably captured by the Golden Fang, and returns reprogrammed into a good capitalist, “‘suddenly no more acid-head philanthropist. They did something to him.’ Who?’ ‘Whoever.’”⁴⁰⁶ While on the path of Wolfmann and the Golden Fang, Doc discovers a smaller conspiracy, one he helps with, and

though the mystery of the Golden Fang remains, at the end Doc resolves in a relatively satisfying way many of the mysteries the novel has presented him with.

Though there are many other parallels, narrative and otherwise, between *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Inherent Vice*, one of the most significant differences is that the conspiracy encountered in the latter is not of the preterit, an alternative, underground, anarchic postal system attempting to subvert the normal communicational channels woven by certain developments attending the advance of Western imperialism. The Golden Fang (also a tax-haven for a group of malevolent dentists) is a familiar figure of the Pynchonian “Them,” a vast conspiracy of the elect whose avatars we may encounter (such as Ronald Reagan⁴⁰⁷), but an entity we can never truly know. Further distinguishing *Inherent Vice* from *The Crying of Lot 49*, the former adheres much more closely to the hard-boiled detective genre, and not just through its frequent and informed references to detective films. Doc, who idolizes the likes of James Garfield enough to have purchased the suit Garfield wore in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946),⁴⁰⁸ self-consciously models himself on the filmic detectives of the 1940s-1960s. Displaying a similar level of irony, cynicism, and detachment to the Southern California hippie counterculture that hard-boiled detectives showed toward society at large, Doc continually receives impressions about the coming absorption of the counterculture into mainstream America and its subsequent commodification, “how the Psychedelic Sixties, this little parenthesis of light, might close after all, and be lost, taken back into darkness. . . how a certain hand might reach terribly out of the darkness and reclaim the time, easy as taking a joint from a dooper and stubbing it out for good.”⁴⁰⁹ In this fashion, *Inherent Vice* is in many ways not only a reimagining and reworking of the world of *The Crying of Lot 49* and a reflection on the failures of the 1960s.⁴¹⁰ It also continually signals an engagement with history thoroughly informed by the forty years that

separate it from its setting, and it is particularly concerned with mapping certain developments of information technology.

The future history of the novel everywhere looms over Pynchon's California, taking paranoid and chaotic tacks. Richard Nixon and Ronald Regan play significant roles; Las Vegas will become a hyperreal "big Disneyland imitation of itself"⁴¹¹—i.e. the continuation of an even-more-organized crime; and the utopia that Wolfmann was trying to build out in the desert, Arrepentimiento, a place that if there was space anyone could live for free, "someday they'll get Mickey to approve a rocket strike, and Arrepentimiento will be history—except it won't be that, because they'll destroy all the records too."⁴¹² In Pynchon's vision of the last forty years of California's history, whatever utopian project California might have had, if there ever was one, can only be seen as having failed. In Pynchon's paranoid Southland, any effort to redistribute wealth will be met with coercion and violence that result, in the extreme, with nuclear missile strikes on US soil and the disappearance of the historical record, the destruction of the archive, in order to prevent any possible alternative mode of living.

But unlike the door foreclosing the future and any hope of establishing epistemological truth at the end of *The Crying of Lot 49*, leaving it forever unclear whether the Tristero exists or not, *Inherent Vice* imagines a form of communication "on some other frequencies,"⁴¹³ that we now *know* is possible, even if this communication on other frequencies gets articulated with the usual Pynchonian absurdity and black irony. The novel's relatively hopeful ending, which I will discuss at further length below, presents an alternative to the total control over the obscuration and destruction of knowledge by Pynchon's invisible forces. There is a sense at the end of *Inherent Vice* that the possibility for the Internet to bring about a nomadic network of fellow citizens—a *collective*—might in fact exist, and that there may even be contemporary instances of

such collectivity. Oedipa's world was closed, Slothrop's was asymptotic and distributed, but Doc, a thoroughly charismatic actor, someone who rarely reveals anything to anyone while still being able to (seemingly) stay quite connected to the world around him in meaningful ways (even in the absence of apparent connections), inhabits a unique position in the Pynchon oeuvre. He is a figure who can successfully and fortuitously negotiate the distributed networks of late-capitalism, a post-Baudrillardian historical subject for whom cybernetic control is not a completely terrifying dystopian vision, but rather a system that can be exploited in the sense Eugene Thacker and Galloway give the word in *The Exploit* (2007).⁴¹⁴ And through Doc, Pynchon is also able to engage with the history of the Internet, with what has happened to the digital computer since the late 1960s.

Less explicit about its concerns with cybernetics than *The Crying of Lot 49*—a novel that thoroughly engages with informational and communications systems of all kinds, to the point that near the end of the novel Oedipa famously perceives that walking through San Narciso “was like walking among matrices of a great digital computer, the zeroes and ones twinned above, hanging like balanced mobiles right and left, ahead, thick, maybe endless”⁴¹⁵—*Inherent Vice* places its concerns with cybernetic systematicity at the relative margins of its narrative, even if they play a significant role in how the novel is conceived and structured. But the manner in which cybernetics *are* present in the novel is significant in a number of ways.

When Doc worked for “Gotcha! Services and Settlements, [who] decided to hire him as a skip-tracer”⁴¹⁶ so that he could pay off the debt he owed them—a job that ultimately led to Doc becoming a private investigator—he worked with one Fritz Drybeam, who now frequently provides Doc with information and expertise during the course of his convoluted investigations. Fritz, who still runs the Gotcha! collection agency, and is thus deeply interested in surveillance

and information, has somehow become connected to the fledgling ARPAnet, a network that would evolve and, in a certain sense, would one day become the internet. Begun in 1969 when computers at the University of California Los Angeles and Stanford University were linked together over a special phone line provided by AT&T, quickly adding the University of California Santa Barbara and the University of Utah to its network, ARPAnet, as the popular (and somewhat true) fiction goes, was originally conceived by the Advanced Research Projects Agency⁴¹⁷ and the RAND Corporation as a potential deterrent against communications breakdown in the event of a large-scale thermonuclear war.^{418, 419}

Visiting Fritz to see if he can find anything out about the baffling disappearance of Mickey and his ex-girlfriend Shasta Fay Hepworth, Doc basically stumbles upon the internet:

“Tell me how many idiots you know got anything like this.”

“Wow, Fritz.” It was like being inside a science-fictional Christmas tree. Little red and green lights were going on and off everywhere. There were computer cabinets, consoles with lit-up video screens, and alphanumeric keyboards, and cables running all over the floor among unswept drifts of little bug-size rectangles punched out of IBM cards, and a couple of Gestetner copy machines in the corner, and towering over the scene along the walls a number of Ampex tape reels busily twitching back and forth.

“ARPAnet,” Fritz announced.

“Ah, no I better not, I’ve got to drive and stuff, maybe just give me one for later—”

“It’s a network of computers, Doc, all connected together by phone lines. UCLA, Isla Vista, Stanford. Say there’s a file they have up there and you don’t, they’ll send it right along at fifty thousand characters per second.”⁴²⁰

The fact of the matter is that many of us idiots walking around in 2009 (and beyond) have something that resembles this computer system in their pockets, at a tiny fraction of the size and cost, and exponentially many times its speed. To reflect this condition of contemporaneity, over the course of the novel Fritz's ARPAnet begins to evolve, more and more resembling today's Internet with all its multiplicitous capabilities. To exploit some of these capabilities Fritz hires a teenage hacker named Sparky who "has to call his mom if he's gonna be late for supper, only guess what—we're *his* trainees!"⁴²¹ Sparky has the ability to "get into the CII computer up in Sacramento without them knowing,"⁴²² as well as the California Department of Motor Vehicles and the Federal Aviation Administration. Though clearly an anachronism here—there was no way ARPAnet could have accessed any of these databases at the time—Pynchon's ARPAnet is a powerful symbol. As Galloway and Thacker put it, "The network, it appears, has emerged as a dominant form describing the nature of control today, as well as resistance to it."⁴²³ In *Inherent Vice* ARPAnet and the various networks of contemporaneity are both a mode of resistance to the paranoid conspiracies familiar to any reader of Pynchon, and a system of control, where "someday everybody's gonna wake up to find they're under surveillance they can't escape."⁴²⁴

But as usual in Pynchon, with his unceasing sense of irony, anything that may at first appear black and white, especially a binary, digital system contains "excluded middles."⁴²⁵ For Doc, however, they are not necessarily "bad shit, to be avoided,"⁴²⁶ but rather articulate themselves as *psychedelic*. Doc's first reaction to ARPAnet is not systematic. It is neither a system of surveillance and control, nor is it a rhizomatic network capable of mass-scale democratization. Rather, he thinks it is some drug that he "better not" take because he's "got to drive and stuff," but maybe he'll take "one for later." Doc, though not a frequent user of, and fairly ambivalent about, psychedelics, is quite familiar with LSD, and twice during the novel is

drugged (at which time he has psychedelic visions, more on this in a moment). After learning of ARPAnet's capabilities and inquiring after the location of Shasta, Doc then wants to know, "Does it know where I can score?"⁴²⁷ Further, Fritz later characterizes Sparky's experience of ARPAnet itself as psychedelic:

"[H]e gets on this ARPAnet trip, and I swear it's like acid, a whole 'nother strange world—time, space, all that shit."

"So when they gonna make it illegal, Fritz?"

"What. Why would they do that?"

"Remember how they outlawed acid as soon as they found out it was a channel to somethin they didn't want us to see? Why should information be any different?"⁴²⁸

Pynchon thus frames the internet as a certain kind of psychedelic drug. It simultaneously gives an individual access to different ways of being, alternative frequencies of communication, and new avenues for the emergence of the imagination in which "space, time, all that shit" is experienced differently, but already access to information is being framed as something that should be controlled and regulated for it is "a channel to something *they* didn't want us to see."

ARPAnet in *Inherent Vice* is carefully constructed as a system that has multiple potentialities, both sinister and liberatory. Like the historical ARPAnet, which was initially funded by the US Department of Defense, Pynchon's ARPAnet is also a product of the military industrial complex, but for Fritz, "hell, it's government money, and those fuckers don't care what they spend, and we've had some useful surprises already."⁴²⁹ ARPAnet quickly evolved during the 1970s and 1980s into something quite different than merely a military communications network, transforming into a largely civilian and academic system that grew too large too quickly for any single entity to control. Pynchon's ARPAnet, however, is already being

surveilled by the FBI.⁴³⁰ By the end of the novel, Fritz's (psychedelic) experience of the Web produces increasing levels of anxiety, to the point that "he also thinks the ARPAnet has taken his soul," but, as Sparky points out, "The system has no use for souls. Not how it works at all. Even this thing about going into other people's lives? it isn't like some Eastern trip of absorbing into a collective consciousness. It's only finding stuff out that somebody else didn't think you were going to. And it's moving so fast, like the more we know, the more we know, you can almost see it change one day to the next."⁴³¹ Pynchon's ARPAnet is experienced both as psychedelic and as purely, coldly informatic; it is dynamic and fluid, exponentially growing (according to Moore's Law), changing from one day to the next, while it is simultaneously inhuman, soullessly accumulating data for the simple sake of accumulating data.

Consequently, unlike the relatively dystopian world of San Narciso, whose suburban "swirl of houses [. . .] sprang at [Oedipa] now with the same unexpected, astonishing clarity as the circuit card had,"⁴³² *Inherent Vice* is not only a paranoid denouncement of cybernetic systems reifying the human, remaking the world through their brutal, informatic logic. It is this as well, of course, but the psychedelic coloring that Pynchon gives to ARPAnet moves it into the realm of *Against the Day*'s Iceland spar: something that houses the potential to provide a different perspective on a refracted and rewritten history. History becomes "all data. Ones and zeros. All recoverable. Eternally present."⁴³³ Though Pynchon always acknowledges the violence attending modernity's capture of light, his representation of ARPAnet in *Inherent Vice* leaves open the possibility for imagining a different future through a complex rereading and reinterpretation of the data of history, which is now eternally present in this luminous archive. For it should be remembered that the internet truly came into its own during 1990s and 2000s through the massive amount of *fiber-optic* cable that was laid all over the globe, an effort that

now allows nearly instantaneous communication with virtually anywhere through the transmission of light. This is a system that was initially funded by the US Department of Defense in order to counteract modernity's other significant capture of light—the nuclear bomb—and as such, the fiber-optic capture of light should be read with regard to Pynchon's oeuvre as both an outgrowth of the violence of the bomb, as well as a mode of resisting an eschatological foreclosure of history. In this fashion, Pynchon is very much concerned with what I have called the *optical society*, a society whose ability to use, capture, transform, and transmit light might productively be considered one of the most distinguishing features of twentieth and twenty-first century American culture. If the luminous master signifier of the US national fantasy during the Cold War was the nuclear bomb, for the Pynchon of 2009, contemporaneity's luminous master signifier is the fiber-optic network.

Following this, Doc's psychedelic experiences in the novel are telling in terms of their insight into the optical society. Attempting to find Shasta on other frequencies, Doc purposely takes acid at one point.

At least it wasn't quite as cosmic as the last trip this acid enthusiast had acted as travel agent for. When it began exactly wasn't too clear, but at some point, via some simple, normal transmission, Doc found himself in the vividly lit ruin of an ancient city that was, and also wasn't, everyday Greater L.A.—stretching on for miles, house after house, room after room, every room inhabited. At first he thought he recognized the people he ran into, though he couldn't always put names to them. Everybody living at the beach, for example, Doc and all his neighbors, were and were not refugees from the disaster which had sunk Lemuria thousands of years ago. Seeking areas of land they believed to be safe, they had settled on the coast of California.⁴³⁴

If acid, for Doc, “was a channel to somethin they didn’t want us to see,” his drug-induced vision “reveals” the real of history, tearing the veil of *māyā* from the occluded, hidden history of Los Angeles that They don’t want him to see. This, in essence, is a vision of a Gödelian history that projects itself backward and forward through time, depicting LA as the vast megalopolis it had become by 2009, and as an ancient city, built in the aftermath of Lemuria’s destruction, a mythical civilization that supposedly resided on a continent in the Pacific that also sunk around the time Atlantis disappeared. Simultaneously decadent and highly technological, post-apocalyptic and suburban, Doc’s vision of LA can appropriately be viewed as what Pynchon sees when he attempts to look at (something that I think can here productively be called) the Lacanian Real of the optical society. That this Real is historically projected in time and space, “vividly lit,” in some slightly alternate universe (our own), as always already post-apocalyptic should also emphasize Pynchon’s writing of the disaster, a present that is always already post-apocalyptic.

Mike Davis’s popular and incisive 1999 study of Los Angeles and the disaster imagination, *Ecology of Fear*, though not explicitly evoked by Pynchon, I think can be productively used as a possible touchstone for *Inherent Vice*’s vision of historical disaster. For Davis, that Southern California was “at risk from multiple, interlinked disaster [. . .] writes one geographer, ‘is the epitome of this phenomenon.’”⁴³⁵ Due to its unique Mediterranean ecology, the fault lines upon which it resides, its vicinity to the ocean, the proximity of the desert, etc., Southern California for Davis defines a complex web of risk, of disasters that are both constantly projected in the imagination—say, Hollywood disaster films—and many that have definitively occurred throughout Los Angeles’s history. Doc’s post-apocalyptic vision of the mythical Lemuria should thus also be read as his realization of the foreclosure of the counterculture’s utopian project (or lack of one, especially in the wake of the Manson murders). The vast suburbs

of Los Angeles have counterintuitively metastasized throughout a landscape that is often bombarded by earthquakes, wildfires, mudslides, tornadoes, not to mention the riots of 1965 and 1992, etc. The contemporary history of Los Angeles, for Davis, can most productively be told through an ecological, historical, and cultural study of catastrophe; and for Doc, the metaphor of Lemuria is able to capture this fallen, secular Los Angeles.

Consequently, we can here understand that if there is an apocalyptic vision available to Pynchon in 2009, even in light of the massive technological transformation that urbanity made on the physical world of Southern California during the late twentieth century (for both good and ill), the sense of disaster that is glimpsed in *Inherent Vice is distributed throughout history—both materially and imaginatively*. Doc's hallucination continues, quickly transcending the boundaries of his locality, and he soon perceives that the entirety of history—both locally in Los Angeles and Vietnam, but also between Lemuria and Atlantis—is something that can be narratively understood as one vast conspiracy of ancient forces:

and somehow unavoidably the war in Indochina figured in. The U.S., being located between the two oceans into which Atlantis and Lemuria disappeared, was the middle term in their ancient rivalry, remaining trapped in that position up to the present day, imagining itself to be fighting in Southeast Asia out of free will but in fact repeating a karmic loop as old as the geography of those oceans, with Nixon a descendent of Atlantis just as Ho Chi Minh was of Lemuria, because for tens of thousands of years all wars in Indochina had really been proxy wars, going back and forth, back to the previous world, before the U.S., or French Indochina, before the Catholic Church, before the Buddha, before written history, to the moment when three Lemurian holy men landed on those shores, fleeing the terrible inundation which had taken their homeland, bringing with

them the stone pillar they had rescued from their temple in Lemuria and would set up as the foundation of their new life and the heart of their exile. [. . .] Ever since France began colonizing Indochina, on through the present occupation by the U.S., the sacred stone had remained invisible, withdrawn into its own space. . . .⁴³⁶

Though I think this passage initially encourages a postcolonial reading that would emphasize the conflict between the occident and the orient, between Western and Eastern Imperialism, and this is something that should be mentioned, as it is clearly something Pynchon is concerned with here, it is also important that Indochina is seen here as a “proxy” space whose role is simply to be a parcel of land fought over by the expression of some “ancient” forces. That this reifies the historical subjectivity of the native Vietnamese inhabitant is I think Pynchon’s point. To understand Southeast Asia as merely an area capable of staging the historical battle between Lemuria and Atlantis, a conflict that I think should clearly be read in light of the Cold War as one between the United States and the Soviet Union, is to understand Vietnam as a place where the obscene truth of the “absent” violence of the Cold War, the possibility of total nuclear annihilation, can be expressed. By drawing history’s traces through the fantasmatic construction of Lemuria, Pynchon situates his Los Angeles, like Vietnam, as a complex node in a global network of disaster.

But Doc’s vision here allows a glimpse of a physical manifestation of some ancient alternative. In the aftermath of *The Crying of Lot 49*’s foreclosure of historical revelation, Doc’s acid trip, though something we should not take completely seriously (after all), does beg the question of what would happen if the “sacred stone,” whatever that may be, reappeared. If the stone is “withdrawn into its own space,” this space collapses into itself, overwhelmed by its own immense gravity in the face of the Cold War and The Bomb. By inscribing Los Angeles into the

same conceptual space as Vietnam, Pynchon understands Southern California as inhabiting a similar realm. Further, if this “sacred stone” of Lemuria presents the possibility of manifesting a different history in the absence of the Cold War, Doc very much understands ARPAnet in these terms, as a possible site for the emergence of possibilities that imagine an alternative history to his horrifying psychedelic vision.

At the end of the novel, driving aimlessly south from Gotcha!, ARPAnet, and Sparky—who tells Doc that he will help him “set up your own system if you want. It’s the wave of the future, ain’t it”⁴³⁷—Doc encounters a significant fog that makes the

third dimension grow less and less reliable. [. . .] Doc wondered how many people he knew had been caught out tonight in this fog, and how many were indoors fogbound in front of the tube or in bed just falling asleep. Someday—he figured Sparky would confirm it—there’d be phones as standard equipment in every car, maybe even dashboard computers. People could exchange names and addresses and life stories and form alumni associations to gather once a year at some bar off a different freeway exit each time, to remember the night they set up a temporary commune to help each other home through the fog.⁴³⁸

Doc’s prescient vision of the internet, social media, and the ubiquity of information technology, like Slothrop’s vision of the Bomb, is both veiled and brought about by fog. And I think we are encouraged to read this moment in two ways.

First, the future of network technology, the computers in our cars and phones, makes it possible to share a relatively striking moment of unselfish collectivity. The anonymity of the streets, the fog both veiling the world around Doc and to which this nomadic caravan of cars responds to by relying on each other in order to pass through this two-dimensional smooth space,

is captured by the ARPAnet, allowing this collective to historically acknowledge how spectacular this moment of cooperation actually is considering the solipsism images of the car can so often represent in contemporaneity. This becomes an event, in the full sense of the word, a thing to be celebrated, a moment of fidelity (even a kind of minor revelation), and it achieves this evental status through its ability to be *recorded*. The history of this collectivity becomes a node within the very system that makes the experience possible—Doc is anticipating the moment when the instantaneous recording of even the most trivial events immediately develops its own kind of history. As Sparky says, “the more we know, the more we know”; the accumulation of knowledge and the speed at which we communicate have been exponential in their development. The hyperarchival, recursive impulse of this collectivity should be thus read in light of the current state of social media, with the recording, acknowledging, and “liking” of a large multiplicity of various events at many different levels of locality (including the event of liking the event).

So secondly, the utter banality of this collectivity should be noted. That this “temporary commune” can only be brought about through a ubiquitous system of command and control should be understood with the full incisive brunt of Pynchonian irony and Norbert Weiner’s fears about cybernetics.⁴³⁹ How small, mundane, and common is this event and its subsequent inscription into history? This type of archival temporality, this sharing of an event both as it happens, but also as it is *going* to happen—how the consciousness of conserving this event in the digital archive always inscribes the events’ own future upon the event itself—occurs through a technology that surrounds us today. (To paraphrase Galloway: code is the air we breathe.) In other words, though this may not be a “new” type of technology—as by now we are quite aware that the recording of history very much dictates how we narrate the past⁴⁴⁰ and experience the

future—its ubiquity normalizes this type “historical time” across a range of possibilities for communicating between subjects.

Thus Doc’s aptitude, here as elsewhere, with “reading” this historical time as well as the very genre he is inscribed within, makes him a kind of contemporary “hero of the archive.” Doc cannot only project his digital future into the present, the novel leaves him on the doorstep of having his own ARPAnet, after which his ability to make connections and accumulate data will only increase. He is a digital subject, a citizen of the optical society who can connect to those around him and decode his immediate historical locality to some degree, though the late-capitalist mystery of the Golden Fang, like the Tristero for Oedipa, will remain opaque to him. Doc’s resistance to forces like the Golden Fang must remain local, and in some ways, impotent and flailing; but as he enacts a certain kind of ethical being throughout the novel (even if he is unable to fully articulate his honorable hippie-stoner ethics into some kind of creed), this ability-to-connect-as-resistance, to help people out against Them, enables him to walk a fine line between control and resistance, surveillance and liberality; he is a hero for the optical society, for a world drenched in fog behind which there may be nothing whatsoever.⁴⁴¹

The lines that conclude the novel—Doc’s final vision of driving south from Los Angeles—consequently engages a complex temporality in which the optical society’s history must be read through how it recursively constructs that history.

Maybe then it would stay this way for days, maybe he’d have to just keep driving, down past Long Beach, down through Orange County, and San Diego, and across a border where nobody could tell anymore in the fog who was Mexican, who was Anglo, who was anybody. Then again, he might run out of gas before that happened, and have to leave the caravan, and pull over on the shoulder, and wait. For whatever would happen. For a

forgotten joint to materialize in his pocket. For the [California Highway Patrol] to come by and choose not to hassle him. For a restless blonde in a Stingray to stop and offer him a ride. For the fog to burn away, and for something else this time, somehow, to be there instead.⁴⁴²

Inherent Vice closes with Doc's hopeful imagining of some alternative history and future. The fog of postmodernity, from Slothrop to Doc is something we must be helped home through. But this does not mean that some desirable destinations are not possible for Doc and his caravan of drivers. Most significant among these is how Doc's vision holds out the utopian possibility of racial equality. Indeed, this potential destination "where nobody could tell anymore who was [. . .] anybody," moves toward an anti-surveillance society, where the ease with which humans are categorized and reified disappears. If Doc lacks the force to reach this utopian subjectivity, there still remains the more modest promise of a small amount of chemical pleasure, an understanding police force, and a fantasmatic (Californian) sexual imaginary. But most importantly, there remains the hope that there will be something else there instead. Straddling 1970 and 2009, this "something else" is both the history of those 40 years and futurity itself.

Pynchon's sense of an ending in 2009 should consequently be read against his asymptotic projection of a thermonuclear future in the 1973 of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Though more obviously cataclysmic, Slothrop's dispersed subjectivity—he achieves a kind of "network-being"—can be understood quite differently from Doc's own network-being. Rather than being dispersed, Doc is another Pynchonian hermeneutist, someone for whom the work of history resides in his ability to perceive other frequencies of communication. If Slothrop can perceive these other frequencies, his dispersal results from his inability to decipher them (as in his inability to read the image of Hiroshima). Doc, on the other hand, though he surely cannot read the Golden Fang, can, out of

the fog of postmodernity, to imagine “something else this time”: namely, something other than the disaster ecology of the late-twentieth century. For Pynchon’s eschatology in *Inherent Vice* has evolved into a much more multiplicitous, dispersed, and rhizomatic sense of doom than the singularity dominating the end of *Gravity’s Rainbow*; but the ability to catch some glimpse behind the fog, behind the veil, that there may well be a kind of utopian project after all, also serves to revise *The Crying of Lot 49*’s project of foreclosing revelation as a mode of understanding. In short, as the most recent novel in Pynchon’s luminous historical drama, the possibility for some type of future that is not about to be eschatologically foreclosed through MAD emerges, but having come this far, and avoided global catastrophe, in the face of the very real disasters of the optical society and the early twenty-first century, hopefully the utopian destination is not too far off.

3.6 WRITING THE NETWORK OF PYNCHON AND POST-NUCLEAR SUBJECTIVITY IN *GRAVITY’S RAINBOW*

To give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city one day suddenly disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book.

—James Joyce⁴⁴³

It is upon losing what we have to say that we speak—upon an imminent and immemorial disaster—just as we say nothing except insofar as we can convey in advance that we have to take it back, by a sort of prolepsis, not so as finally to say nothing, but so that speaking might not stop at the word—the word which is, or is to be, spoken or taken back.

—Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*⁴⁴⁴

Throughout this chapter I have endeavored to read Pynchon somewhat methodically, yet with an ear toward his constant recursive irony and play, my hope being that this criticism-as-methodical-play still presents a clear account of the complex network of nuclear light woven throughout his massive fiction. The large sweep of narrative this chapter covers, however (even as it relatively ignores *Vineland* and *V.*), is miniscule compared to the worlds created in the works I discuss; and if I touch on only a few exemplary moments (as I currently do), this is simply a result of the massiveness of Pynchon's historical project, and is unavoidable. As many critics I think are correct in suggesting, it is appropriate at this point to consider his entire oeuvre as one vast historical work that is clearly as ambitious as a Joyce or a Proust (if not in fact a bit more so). In this, Pynchon may very well be incomparable as an American writer. Virtually no one else (with the exception of Balzac [perhaps]) has taken on such an ambitious lifetime project, which now spans upwards of fifty years and eight large and significant volumes. The historical time-span covered in his novels and short stories, the transnational multiplicity of geographic settings, the overflowing abundance of characters, the ever-present and complex political concerns, the various utopian and dystopian projections, and the hyperactive referentiality of Pynchon's fiction, especially considered as a whole (which only multiplies the number of connections between the works), has no equal at the moment. This has made it a frankly daunting task to adequately account for his encyclopedic breadth and the power of his vision.

Nevertheless, though subtle and always ironic, Pynchon's stated interest in a number of interconnected forces, many of which I have traced the development of here—emphasizing specifically the networks formed between technologies of destruction and accumulation, nuclear

physics and cybernetics—signals his deep and abiding concern with twentieth and twenty-first century history, and, somewhat counterintuitively, his vast capacity for (something like love or hope? or perhaps simple) generosity toward his audience, even in the face of utter disaster.

To read Thomas Pynchon is to read an encyclopedia for a vibrantly imagined, infinitely detailed, textually layered, entertaining, carnivalesque, and horrifying Borgesian world which does not exist (and frequently comes into contact with our own in a variety of often traumatic ways). Despite the breadth and scope of his fiction, however, it is also surprisingly consistent in style and form (e.g. the songs in every novel, the silly names, the poaching of genres, the Faulknerian syntax, etc.); and this is because Pynchon's structures his prose and conceives of his narratives as *networks*. No other critical metaphor can quite capture Pynchon's hyperarchival prose. A dizzying number of aspects in Pynchon's world(s) readily encourage connections between other aspects, connections that can be fantastic and oblique, and that often seem to point toward a moment when the lines could be singled up, when the interpretive threads could be woven together into something *else*, even if that destination can never arrive. And though I think part of the value of his work is the generosity with which Pynchon encourages a multiplicity of readings as a sheer aspect of the exuberance of his poetics and historical vision, he is also clearly aware of many of the hermeneutic problems his *mega-narrative* presents,⁴⁴⁵ and addresses these problems quite explicitly in many of the moments I have chosen to focus on. For his project is also one of return, of revising, rewriting, reinterpreting, and reimagining not only the events of history, but the events of his own work,⁴⁴⁶ a project of rigorous difference and repetition, a library that is constantly in the act of rewriting itself.

The field of postmodern American (meta)fiction, Pynchon's archival impulse is exemplary. With the announcement of such works as Mark Z. Danielewski's *The Familiar*

(2014-), a novel to be serialized in twenty-seven volumes once every three months for seven years,⁴⁴⁷ and Richard Grossman's forthcoming three-million page novel, *Breeze Avenue* (2014),⁴⁴⁸ we might do well to consider Pynchon's work as a forerunner to (if not a certain kind of apogee of) the late-twentieth, early twenty-first century *mega-text*.⁴⁴⁹ This is in no way to suggest that conceiving text as simply overwhelming in size is an even remotely new phenomenon,⁴⁵⁰ but the current capacities of both digital *and* print information storage is undeniably staggering, and I think one is encouraged to consider that aesthetic production will find new ways of using the exponentially increasing capacity of the external memory of contemporaneity. Pynchon's encyclopedic worlds are projected through a willful mass-accumulation within and of (deconstructed) information networks, an accumulation that at first resembles the unfiltered data of the real, seemingly chaotic or anarchic, but also a mode of gathering together that is at times undeniably meticulous and deliberate. Pynchon's hyperarchival meshwork of textuality consistently strives to represent life in the network/optical society. By enacting the information overload introduced by cybernetic systems in his own work, while attenuating that overload through the interpretive apparatus of narrative, Pynchon constructs an archive-as-world that I believe will continue to bear critical fruit long into the twenty-first century, and his critical legacy may very well serve as a touchstone for how to read such madly ambitious and difficult and *long* work that somehow is able to capture the imagination and, perhaps most heroically, still entertain.

So it is with this admitted appreciation that I would like to conclude this chapter by revisiting one of the more canonical moments in Pynchon, if for no other reason than it is the subject of Harold Bloom's editorial introduction to critical collections on both Pynchon in general and *Gravity's Rainbow* specifically. Bloom's short introduction (that is probably half

quotation) is unavoidable for anyone beginning to read in Pynchon, as each book gathers together some very well-chosen essays on an array of important topics. Further, as is his wont, Bloom makes some bold claims: Pynchon is indeed “the crucial American writer of prose fiction at the present time. We are now, in my judgment, in the Age of John Ashbery and Thomas Pynchon, which is not to suggest any inadequacy [in James Merrill and Philip Roth], but only to indicate one critic’s conviction as to what now constitutes the Spirit of the Age.”⁴⁵¹ This introduction to Pynchon is also unavoidable, not only because of his agonistic treatment of Pynchon and Ashbery (writers who I obviously think are incredibly significant as well), and how it is difficult to study Pynchon and not to agree with Bloom to some extent (even if one must endlessly qualify themselves), but because it contains his shockingly short list of the American twentieth-century Sublime. The famous Byron the Bulb episode from *Gravity’s Rainbow* is, in 1986, the most recent example for Bloom. He says that the story “touches one of the limits of art [. . . and suggests] what is most vital and least problematic about Pynchon’s achievement as a writer.”⁴⁵²

“The Story of Byron the Bulb” makes its narrative entrance into *Gravity’s Rainbow* when the famous Bulb appears above Lazlo Jamf in the fourth section of the novel, “The Counterforce.” Byron is an immortal bulb that has “been around, in fact, since the twenties [. . .]. Wotta history, this bulb, if only it could speak—well, as a matter of fact in *can* speak.”⁴⁵³ The following eight pages relate the story of poor immortal Byron, who for Bloom, “unlike Slothrop, cannot be scattered, but his high consciousness represents the dark fate of the Gnosis in Pynchon’s vision. For all its negativity, Gnosticism remains a mode of transcendental belief. Pynchon’s is a Gnosis without transcendence. There is a Counterforce, but there is no fathering and mothering abyss to which it can return.”⁴⁵⁴ Bloom’s reading here is convincing, if for the

simple fact that, as many critics of Pynchon have recognized, there are (not even hidden) Gnostic and Freudian elements in his work. Indeed, it is difficult to deny the Gnosticism of: “light-energy,” the single identity imposed by the gods, the sleeping third eye, etc. in passages such as the following: “He has come to see how Bulb must move beyond its role as conveyor of light-energy alone. Phoebus has restricted Bulb to this one identity. ‘But there are other frequencies, above and below the visible band. Bulb can give heat. Bulb can provide energy for plants to grow, illegal plants, inside closets, for example. Bulb can penetrate the sleeping eye, and operate the dreams of men.’”⁴⁵⁵ But I think that primarily reading Byron the Bulb, here and elsewhere, as a figure of the despair of Pynchon’s Gnostic vision does not do justice to the importance of Byron as a figure in *Gravity’s Rainbow*.

In the moment quoted above, Byron is addressing the ontological condition of, for lack of a better term, his “Bulb-ness” and is attempting to communicate a kind of “Bulbology” to his fellow Bulbs in the Grid—what it means to be a Bulb, what the proper utopian project of the Bulb is (which he has realized through a kind of transcendence). And it here where I think one must make a contrast to Bloom by emphasizing Byron’s *nonhuman* subjectivity and consciousness. Pynchon, as is so often the case, is most interesting if we begin by taking him quite literally, which suggests that this immortal bulb is real within the diegetic space of his narrative. Surely this is in no way to ignore the allegorical power of the episode and its resonance with the rest of the novel, but rather to emphasize the materiality of Pynchon even at his most fantasmatic. Rather than have recourse to the Gnostic Pynchon, the Pynchon for whom the text is always a Gordian knot that no hermeneutics can cut, Pynchon’s decision to construct his “transcendent” or “messianic” non-distributed, post-nuclear subject must be read in all its vibrant materiality.

Byron communicates his story, is able to *speak*, by “dictating the muscular modulations of Paddy McGonigle’s cranking tonight, this is a loop here, with feedback through Paddy to the generator again. Here it is.”⁴⁵⁶ Byron is able to generate discourse, and thus provides a text to read (in a Gnostic or whatever fashion), through his vibration, creating a virtuous feedback loop in the small network connecting a generator, the muscles in Paddy’s body, and Byron the Bulb. Beyond being simply a tiny anti-entropic perpetual motion machine, this bodily circuit makes possible the discursive articulation and resonance of Byron’s nonhuman being. Further, he can communicate on Pynchon’s Ellisonian bandwidth because “there are other frequencies, above and below the visible band.” Byron’s power, both in his ability to speak and his influence over the material world derive from his perception and utilization of the material frequencies of light. Consequently, I think we are invited to read Byron as an articulation of one kind of post-nuclear subject, a citizen of the optical society whose emergence is unpredictable and nonhuman, and who can communicate on other frequencies. Further, Byron’s singularity is provided by Pynchon’s calculus, where “Statistically (so Their story goes), every n-thousandth light bulb is gonna be perfect, all the delta-q’s piling up just right, so we shouldn’t be surprised that this one’s still around, burning brightly.”⁴⁵⁷ Byron is a statistically unlikely but probable emergent subjectivity from the Grid, from the global network of postmodernity.

Consequently, Byron as a speaking, nonhuman, luminous being should in one sense be understood as one of Pynchon’s most important forces—*light*—writing. (This is not a metaphor.) As such, the questions that arise with regard to Byron the Bulb and his story involve what Vicki Kirby calls Nature’s scriptability: “If we take very seriously the notion of an originary writing/*mathesis*, then intelligence, agency, literacy, and numeracy are implicated in the ontogenesis of scriptability. And with no *pre*-scription, no natural exemption from

writing/technology/invention, then the question of language (and being, more generally) radically presents itself.”⁴⁵⁸ To parse Kirby’s language a bit, her project boldly takes up the modes in which we (sometimes metaphorically) understand natural phenomena to be doing a kind of writing—e.g., DNA’s ability to communicate—and, if we remove our current exemptions and limits on what constitutes “writing,” exemptions that are largely (still) anthropocentric with regard to scriptability (and not wholly adequate anyway), we might then radically expand what might be considered writing or what she here calls “mathesis.” The radical notion she attempts to take up, that also provides the epigraph to this chapter, is to contemplate what a critical practice of reading the writing of Nature (which includes the human) might look like, a mode that might revise-by-extension Derrida’s famous dictum about the outside of texts, to “a more radical commitment to a horizon of possibility and change that embraces this dictum *without reservation* might argue that ‘there is no outside of Nature.’”⁴⁵⁹ This radical question of a deeper and more material notion of language, rather than consider Byron as a stand-in for a human subject or as a radically nonhuman other, Kirby’s perspective allows us to understand that Byron’s writing—*light writing*—is deeply connected to his being, and the being of the twentieth-century’s project of capturing of light. In the world of *Gravity’s Rainbow* Byron’s writing is an emergent mathesis (like five-thousand monkeys typing), but it is also one *intimately* tied to the human through the network which allows its expression. In this fashion, Byron inhabits a kind of nonhuman dialogical terrain. He is, among other things, an artificial intelligence and a posthuman singularity, the Adamsian dynamo (and perhaps a messianic event in the Benjaminian sense), a revolutionary and a Gnostic sage, and ultimately, may simply be yet another victim of late capitalism on an epically tragic (and comic) scale.

In *Against the Day* light achieves mathesis through its refraction and reinterpretation through the many layers of Iceland spar, narrative, and genre. In that novel light displayed a certain kind of historical power, but I think we must read this activity of light always already in the wake of *Gravity's Rainbow*, or at least as a later reconsideration of the historical role that the capture of light plays. In the "Story of Byron the Bulb," through sheer mathematical happenstance of production on a large enough scale—the worldwide manufacturing of light bulbs—light has emerged from a human network, materially embodied in an individual bulb with a consciousness capable of writing. For all intents and purposes, Byron attains a kind of nonhuman historical subjectivity. And like Bloom's use of long quotations, I feel that Byron's fate deserves to be quoted in full. Having become aware of the worldwide conspiracy of General Electric and Krupp to control the world's tungsten prices so as to control bulb-life spans and thus bulb's very being,

Byron, as he burns on, sees more and more of this pattern. He learns how to make contact with other kinds of electric appliances, in homes, in factories and out on the streets. Each has something to tell him. The pattern gathers his soul (*Seele*, as the core of the earlier carbon filament was known in Germany), and the grander and clearer it grows, the more desperate Byron gets. Someday he will know everything, and still be as impotent as before. His youthful dreams of organizing all the bulbs in the world seem impossible now—the Grid is wide open, all messages can be overheard, and there are more than enough traitors out on the line. Prophets traditionally don't last long—they are either killed outright, or given an accident serious enough to make them stop and think, and most often they do pull back. But on Byron has been visited an even better fate. He is condemned to go on forever, knowing the truth and powerless to change anything. No

longer will he seek to get off the wheel. His anger and frustration will grow without limit, and he will find himself, poor perverse bulb, enjoying it. . . .⁴⁶⁰

If for Pynchon the twentieth-century's project was the capture of light, as I have been arguing here, the light bulb is the clearest expression of the hegemonic nature of this project. The light bulb describes a significant node of the optical society, its lifespan is determined by international market forces speculating on tungsten shares, a price that is set by Them, and all bulbs are manufactured as similarly as possible. Control of light bulbs, and consequently of light itself resembles, quite familiarly, some nightmarish dystopia of the twentieth century.⁴⁶¹ Thus Byron is less the achievement of an ideal, but an unforeseen outgrowth of capitalist production pushed past its own obscene logic. If the biopolitical project of controlling bulbs' lives, of mechanizing the power over life (and death), is pushed far enough, a subject will emerge that biopower cannot kill. But this subject, for Pynchon, is necessarily always already nonhuman. Thus, rather than suspect an eschatological messianism or a heroic postmodern political subject in Pynchon, there is a deep despair in positing this emergent, resistant singularity who "know[s] the truth and [is] powerless to change anything," and this biopolitical power over life, and most importantly, to *make live*, is explicitly tied to the forces at work during the Second World War.

The conspiracy controlling the bulbs is both American and German, and "when the War came, some people thought it unpatriotic of GE to have given Germany an edge like that. But nobody with any power. Don't worry."⁴⁶² Thus power over light bulbs easily translates into power over mechanized death through the manipulation of world markets so as to ensure the eruption of total war (in which Germany would have the "edge"). This is the essence of Byron's paranoid vision: modernity's project of capturing light results in Auschwitz and Hiroshima. His knowledge of history is total, but this singular subject of the optical society is impotent to stop

the control of light or combat the horrors of modernity, his youthful dreams of revolutionary change having evaporated with the appearance of the wide open, yet striated space of the Grid imposed over the smooth space of the Zone. His ability to communicate with the other subjects in the Grid—a space of ubiquitous surveillance and control—makes him no less “condemned to go on forever, knowing the truth and powerless to change it,” nor does his hyperarchival ability to access all knowledge on the Grid contribute to effective change. In fact, “he will find himself, poor perverse bulb, enjoying it . . .” The Grid’s dominating logic of controlling “the ratio of the usable power coming out, to the power put in. The Grid demanded that this ratio stay as small as possible. That way they got to sell more juice”⁴⁶³—or rather, the basic imperative of capital to accumulate, to create surplus profit—this ratio produces the postmodern subject whose own knowledge of the Grid’s horrors and his resistance to the system can be turned into a kind of perverse, masochistic pleasure.

In addition to his other resonances, we should read Byron as what Giorgio Agamben has famously called *homo sacer* (or bare life). The power the Grid has over him, through his total capture, is not simply expressed in Byron’s impotence to effect change, it is the Grid’s power to make Byron live (to *make live*, as Agamben’s translators puts it) through which its sovereign power is exercised. Byron inhabits “the state of exception, which was essentially a temporary suspension of the juridico-political order [the laws regulating a bulb’s lifespan], now becomes a new and stable spatial arrangement inhabited by bare life that more and more can no longer be inscribed in that order.”⁴⁶⁴ Byron does not fit into the established order of the Grid; his obscene immortality is exceptional. And yet the Grid is fully aware of his presence, and makes a new and stable spatial arrangement in which Byron continues to play his function within the logic of the system, illuminating rooms everywhere. As such, the Grid, or “the camp, which is now securely

lodged within the city's interior, is the new biopolitical *nomos* of the planet," the space where "the sovereign is the point of indistinction between violence and law, the threshold on which violence passes over into law and law passes over into violence."⁴⁶⁵ Byron is a historical object of a biopower whose reach, given Byron's non- or posthumanity, extends all the way down to matter, energy, and electricity itself.

I think we are encouraged, then, to not read Byron as some sort of transcendental subject or, on the other hand, some totally reified object of biopower, but rather as an emergent outgrowth of postmodernity's capture of light. Byron emerges from the very Grid whose project is control, becoming in the process the being made to live, to survive.⁴⁶⁶ Quite importantly, however, he is simultaneously a *witness* to the history of modernity as well as one who is able to *speak*. As Agamben argues, "*The authority of the witness consists in his capacity to speak solely in the name of an incapacity to speak—that is, in his or her being a subject.*"⁴⁶⁷ And in this Byron's speech is authoritative, clearly articulating a form of subjectivity that is resistant to reification. His quite literal incapacity to speak (he is, after all, a light bulb), gives his story, communicated on other frequencies, the historical authority of the witness. It is through his writing by way of a network, through his ability to develop a communicational network of different beings, that he is able to articulate his own subjectivity. Even if he is controlled by the logic of modernity, his emergence leaves open other possibilities for witnessing and speaking.

And in this, it is Byron's formal articulation of a *network* that is the most significant aspect of his speech. By creating a network, *materially* linking the nonhuman and human, labor and electricity, Byron anticipates and Pynchon's world *projects* further possible networks, and indeed, a network of networks, or an Internet. Like the next words about to be uttered for Oedipa as *The Crying of Lot 49* concludes, Slothrop's dispersed being, the hyperarchival Iceland spar

and non-temporal Chums of Chance, or Doc's networked-being, Byron holds out the hope of alternatives, of other networks being formed, of different frequencies for different kinds of communication. Unlike these other Pynchonian subjects, however, for whom light can only be approached through remediation—e.g., nuclear light can only be perceived by Slothrop through the remediation of the nuclear text, an experience that destroys him—Byron is capable of bearing witness to the capture of light. This is a terrible, nihilistic, Promethean knowledge in which nothing is gained by enduring pain through eternity (by anyone). Though these are Captain Blicero's words—who assembles and fires the 00000 rocket (more on this in a moment), I think we can safely assume that, among other things, Byron's *resistance* to the Grid can be read as a result of his bearing witness to certain aspects of European colonialism and the Shoah: “In Africa, Asia, Amerindia, Oceania, Europe came and established its order of Analysis and Death.”⁴⁶⁸ But he also bears witness to an American postwar project that would be a continuation and replacement of that phase of history; and a Bomb that has introduced the real possibility of global mega-death and an eschaton: “Now we are in the *last* phase. American Death has come to occupy Europe. It has learned empire from its old metropolis.”⁴⁶⁹ It is difficult to argue that the most visible outgrowth of this American Death, this global power over destruction, this *telos* of European Death is The Bomb (in a fairly non-metaphorical way). Brought about by scientific analysis, during the Cold War the atomic Bomb and later the hydrogen Bomb were installed throughout Europe, often targeting other locations in Europe. Consequently, Byron, through writing/speaking, inscribes nuclear light into *Gravity's Rainbow's world*, a world that in 1973, even though the US and USSR were experiencing a moment of relative détente, remains perched upon the last delta-t of annihilation, the explosion of nuclear light that can never be glimpsed, or if glimpsed, a light that would inscribe the viewer forever.⁴⁷⁰

It is thus of immense importance that Byron is able to bear witness to the horrors of modernity in the past, present, and future through *writing*. Further, he should be read not only as an expression of Pynchon's Gnostic despair, but his material and optical hope, his acknowledgment of the emergence of other alternatives to MAD, different subjective and imaginative possibilities, that though always already textual, can nonetheless bear witness to what, essentially, cannot be witnessed. The eschatological (but asymptotic) narrative structure of *Gravity's Rainbow* (and the Cold War more generally), like the ending of *The Crying of Lot 49*, gets right up to the moment of revelation and closure, but withdraws, withholding the event to be witnessed. But Byron, in a very real sense, already *is* the event: the capture of light that signals a new level of global control and violence. For

America *was* the edge of the World. A message from Europe, continent-sized, inescapable. Europe had found the site for its Kingdom of Death, that special Death the West had invented. Savages had their waste regions, Kalaharis, lakes so misty they could not see the other side. But Europe had gone deeper—into obsession, addiction, away from all the savage innocences. America was a gift from the invisible powers, a way of returning. But Europe refused it. It wasn't Europe's Original Sin—the latest name for that is Modern Analysis—but it happens that Subsequent Sin is harder to atone for.⁴⁷¹

If we recall Derrida's notion of the *fabulously textual* nuclear referent, it is through Captain Blicero's interpretation of history (which resembles Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the enlightenment), that we should understand the capture of the force of Death and Byron's nonhuman subjectivity. Byron is the subject who can actually bear witness to *and* write the nuclear text (an impossible figure in Derrida's nuclear criticism, though of course Byron is textual himself). The most visible outgrowths of the American regime of death, thermonuclear

weapons and optical networks of all kinds, have enmeshed the entire globe in its subsequent postcolonial sin. Byron is simultaneously the obscene outgrowth of this systemic *thanatos* whose power is expressed through the biopolitical imperative that he survive, and a being that can presumably access the various networks of the military industrial complex at will. Even if he can do nothing else with this hyperarchival access (for he is a kind of “ghost in the machine”), his ability to write—to imagine other ways of being, to imagine a world not controlled by the now inhuman capture of force, to communicate on other frequencies, to write the *nuclear text*—these capacities of Byron *project worlds*. By giving Byron complete access to the archive of human knowledge, allowing him to understand his own luminous nonhuman subjectivity, and inscribing him with a necessary (and perhaps new) appreciation of the nonhuman and material world in the face of the logic of late capitalism, Pynchon casts Byron in the role of author for the optical society.⁴⁷²

If modernity’s project for Pynchon was in many ways the capture of that most classically ethereal substance, light, and how the subsequent advances in the field of optics has led to a great many technological changes in the species’ material condition—our simultaneous ability to destroy ourselves and (potentially) communicate globally with anyone—then light in Pynchon’s world is the Adamsian material force of postmodernity, and its symbols are The Bomb and ARPAnet. Byron is one of this force’s authors. Not in the sense that he is the pure, Platonic force of light itself—quantum physics teaches us that there is no such thing (it’s not quite like *gravity*)—but in the sense that for Pynchon the author’s role is to bear witness to the world around him and project an alternative one. In this, Pynchon consistently holds out the possibility of what Ernst Bloch calls “anticipatory illumination”⁴⁷³ in his fiction. Byron, Slothrop, Cherrycoke, Mason and Dixon, Oedipa, Doc, and the Chums of Chance all serve a utopian

function, in one way or another (and this could be said of a great number of Pynchon's characters). But as historical subjects, they also must negotiate their contemporary modes of being in all their systemic horror, strangeness, historical contingency, and futility. If Byron, and thus Pynchon and the reader herself, has total access to this *world*,⁴⁷⁴ then Pynchon's work emphasizes the importance of the author function as a necessary utopian dialogical project of rewriting and reinterpreting the material world and the subject's relationship to it if there is to be any articulable future.

Pynchon's work in the wake of the Cold War, which rivals in length and scope the work he did during the first thirty years of his career, has become increasingly difficult to consider through the same lens of Black Humor and recursive irony that his first three novels encouraged. If *Byron the Bulb* is nonetheless condemned to perversely enjoy his eternal oppression, Pynchon's (and his own) writing illuminates a world a little further away from the asymptotic disaster of MAD, a temporality for which that eschatological narrative can no longer suffice. That this is also a world in which disaster has proliferated, where They have gotten stronger and more mysterious, where the paranoiac's ability to make connections has been exacerbated, where reification through surveillance and control has reached an almost aesthetic level of complexity, so have his characters responded sincerely, if obliquely, in kind. To enter Pynchon's world(s), especially his work of the past fifteen years, is to fully immerse oneself in what it means to live in the network society, and to realize how difficult and absolutely necessary the imaginative articulation of alternative narratives are, while simultaneously forcing one to continually bear in mind the ease with which these narratives are absorbed by the cultural logic of late capitalism.

Thomas Pynchon's luminous contemporaneity, his other temporal, spatial, and radial frequencies, and his tangled web of global history stage a profound encounter with the twentieth

century, an epoch that in his fiction achieves a(n often obscene) vitality all its own. In this, Pynchon complexly engages with Badiou's "passion for the real." By providing the nonhuman forces of contemporaneity—light, gravity, entropy, electricity, capital, information, etc.—with agency, Pynchon asks a more fundamental question than the very old one involving the distinction between human and nature, and Badiou also asks this question:

What is the true life—what is it to truly live—with a life adequate to the organic intensity of living? This question traverses the century, and it is intimately linked to the question of the new man, as prefigured by Nietzsche's [*übermensch*]. The thinking of life interrogates the force of the will-to-live. What is it to live in accordance with a will-to-live? More specifically: What is the century as organism, as animal, as a structured and living power? In part, we still belong to this vital century. We necessarily partake of the life that is its own. As Mandelstam says, in the poem's opening line, the century, considered as a beast, is "my beast."⁴⁷⁵

By projecting his vast historical worlds Pynchon's nuclear drama of light attempts to textually transcribe the vital materiality of the twentieth century by ironically and complexly (and entertainingly) engaging with its passion for the real. Between the dynamo and the cybernetic network, the twentieth century assumes the status of organism, both structurally, at the level of language and narrative, and dynamically, at the level of its emergence from the species' manipulation of material forces. Consequently, Pynchon forces us to consider what the emergent, utopian prospects of the present might be, and question what kinds of narratives a vital history—like his historical fiction and the multiplicitous, rhizomatic work that it does—might produce in the wake of the twentieth century. At its root, Pynchon's work shows a deep sympathy with a material ecology that does not distinguish between biological life and other forms of vitality, and

displays a marked antipathy for any reification of the material world. The project of bringing matter closer, of turning the atom into a tool for massive destruction, may be most visible in the images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but it is a project that in Pynchon's world radiates outward to all points in his network, and consequently must be acknowledged, resisted, and exploited. Pynchon's projection of his vast world testifies to the vital importance of the imagination, the necessity of understanding our own implication in the world and its luminously violent history, and the possibility that matter/writing can articulate temporal and ontological alternatives; that there are other frequencies of being that eco-poetic, narrative expression can vibrate on and continue the impossible task of shaping the emergent past, present, and future.

4.0 THE INVERTED NUKE IN THE GARDEN: DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S ARCHIVAL APOCALYPSE

Our life has no end in just the way in which our visual field has no limits.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*⁴⁷⁶

4.1 A SUPPOSEDLY FUN THING I'LL NEVER DO AGAIN: ON DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

For a project of nuclear criticism, the work of David Foster Wallace offers a surprisingly rich field in which to operate, as well as substantial critical rewards. Recursively dense, both syntactically and thematically, Wallace's writing walks the knife-edge between encyclopedic accumulation and a grammatological disaster that threatens language and narrative. Whether writing on early-1990s hip-hop, David Lynch, tennis, Cantorian set theory, cruise ships, addiction, entertainment, or American usage, he is an enviably meticulous writer, perhaps the most syntactically acrobatic, yet nonetheless achingly precise, since Henry James. His erudition and rigor never abate, nor does his sheer fascination and curiosity. Latecomer though he may be, his writing is not a literature of exhaustion—though it can be exhausting to read—but of an almost disturbingly sincere hope and excitement. For a body of work so helplessly aware of the apocalyptic threads always already woven so densely around the possibility of writing itself, it is not only surprisingly optimistic at times, but downright refreshing. Wallace conceived of fiction as a task with an ethical imperative to do something in the world, to provide something, to be a

gift, and not simply a brutal, hopeless representation of a brutal, hopeless reality. For if there is nothing so brutal and hopeless as the end of the human species on Earth, then Wallace may have paved the first foot of a road toward an emergent and incredibly necessary anti-eschatology; his work is a testament to the serious role that literature can play in a time of perpetual crisis.

Among the many important writers of the 1990s, the accomplishment of Wallace in particular was to define a unique web of contemporaneity in a historical period whose narrative had imploded, a writer for whom the truly nuclear disaster was of that narrative's *dissolution* rather than its fruition. History had not been violently, instantaneously ended, as so many assumed had assumed it would be during the Cold War, but rather Perestroika was, for many in the West, less an end than an exhaustion (Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* [1992] rings as a tinny, hollow clamor of triumph). And this stance can be seen in Wallace's own sense of literary production. In an interview with Larry McCaffery describing his goals for the early novella "Westward the Course of Empire Makes its Way,"⁴⁷⁷ Wallace said, "My idea in 'Westward' was to do with metafiction what Moore's poetry or like DeLillo's *Libra* had done with other mediated myths. I wanted to get the Armageddon-explosion, the goal metafiction's always been about, I wanted to get it over with, and then out of the rubble reaffirm the idea of art being a living transaction between humans, whether the transaction was erotic or altruistic or sadistic."⁴⁷⁸ Wallace considered the metafictional postmodern literary production of the 1960s and 70s as a literature obsessed with its own end.⁴⁷⁹ In the case of someone like Don DeLillo—who ended *White Noise* (1985) with a group of suburban Americans perched on the edge of a "computerized nuclear pulse,"⁴⁸⁰ an "ambient roar, in the plain and heartless fact of their decline"⁴⁸¹—Wallace saw himself as coming to the party after it was already over, while everyone remained standing around holding their drinks, wondering whether to go home or not.

Much of his early work, like *The Broom of the System* (1987) and “Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way” (1989), is a literature about the end of ends, an aesthetic of temporal and narrative continuity without a coherent *telos*. For the Wallace after “Westward,” metafictional narrative had reached a breaking point in much the same way that the historical nuclear narrative had. No longer was it possible to stress the crisis that either literature or the nuclear presented with a straight face. The sheer absurdity of nuclear war made much of the paranoiac literary production of the past seem naïve, obsessive, and short-sighted, something to be gone beyond, something to be ironized to the point of sincerity.

And Wallace’s fiction, though at times thoroughly apocalyptic, is also concerned with the problems of solipsism and irony, of a world in which narrative is not sufficient to create meaning outside of the individual. If the US had lost its big Other with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Wallace understood this in narrative terms, not merely as the end of a grand narrative, nor simply acknowledging François Lyotard’s claim in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) that postmodernity was the end of grand narratives in general, but as a kind of Nietzschean Last Man. For Wallace, like Zarathustra, attempted to take irony beyond itself, toward what some have called a “new sincerity,”⁴⁸² but what is perhaps more reminiscent of the kind of meta-self-referential labyrinths in *Human, All Too Human* (1878). He was an exhausted late-comer, an untimely being in the midst of a whimper. His fiction presented a culture turned in on itself, parasitically consuming not only its cultural products, but its waste and detritus as well. Furthermore, this consumption was cyclical and recursive, a nuclear fusion out of control, producing and consuming its own byproduct exponentially.

This recursive consumption/production without limit is one of the central aspects of the world of *Infinite Jest* (1996), his magnum opus.⁴⁸³ Widely hailed as a continuation of (and

successor to) the work of Thomas Pynchon and others, it is considered the most significant post-Cold War American novel by many. Indeed, this novel is now firmly entrenched as particularly demonstrative of a 1990s ideology in its approach to aesthetics, politics, and history, an approach that Wallace's neologism from *Infinite Jest*—*après garde*⁴⁸⁴—might best describe.

A few other factors contribute to the canonical position David Foster Wallace is now quickly inhabiting. His suicide by hanging, considered by most to be wholly related to his clinical depression complicated by a cessation of medication,⁴⁸⁵ has thrown him into a realm reserved for those who lived and died in an untimely fashion, and did so famously.⁴⁸⁶ Wallace was and is uniquely popular. The media blitz surrounding the publication of *Infinite Jest*, from its clever and slightly ominous pre-advertisement, to its post-publication media attention,⁴⁸⁷ appears today as something like the last gasp of the halcyon days of the publishing industry—something now virtually impossible due to the internet's ubiquity and “democratic” leveling. This is also to say, however, that a distinct aspect of Wallace's popularity and influence is directly related to the early adoption of him by internet communities as a significant writer, most notably by fansites like the wallace-l listserv and the famously useful and important website *The Howling Fantods*. Unlike, say, the contemporaries he is most often connected with, writers like Richard Powers, Jonathan Franzen, David Eggers, and William T. Vollmann, whose collective underrepresentation in such forums is perhaps curious (comparatively), Wallace's work somehow appears to demand, and quite often *produce* these types of communities. So much of his fiction and nonfiction presumes the ubiquity of communication and information networks, that, in perfect symmetry, his work found itself the subject of a quite lively discussion because of advances in those very networks, a discussion that was impossible to conduct even a few years before.

Quite quickly, Wallace has been acknowledged as part of an emerging (or perhaps disappearing) canon, so it is revealing that his praise has been so polyphonic and celebratory. He has been called by such emissaries of fiction as George Saunders, “the first among us,” who added in a memorial that he was “the most talented, most daring, most energetic and original, the funniest, the least inclined to rest on his laurels or believe all the praise. His was a spacious, loving heart, and when someone this precious leaves us, especially so early, love converts on the spot to a deep, almost nauseating sadness, and there’s no way around it.”⁴⁸⁸ Author of *Elegant Complexity: A Study of David Foster Wallace’s Infinite Jest* (2007), a Bloomsday-esque companion to Wallace’s sprawling novel, Greg Carlisle writes, “We’ve been admiring and eulogizing him, which is of course appropriate, but now the time has come to evolve the critical conversation about Wallace and to champion him for what he is: the most important author of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.”⁴⁸⁹ Michael Sheehan, in the introduction to a recent 100-page section devoted to Wallace in the *Sonora Review*, said, “in Wallace’s work, we see the infinite depth of the everyday, of every moment, which is at once endlessly interesting and also potentially paralyzing.”⁴⁹⁰ It is precisely the “presence” of the infinite in Wallace’s work, as opposed to (perhaps) Pynchonian entropy, that occasions such loud appraisals. For he was at all times engaged in some type of infinity, positive or negative, large or small, vicious or virtuous.

For instance, Wallace ends *Everything and More: A Compact History of ∞* , his quite readable pop-math book on the subject of infinity and Cantorian set theory, with the following statement: “there are actually a whole ∞ of Zeno-type ∞ s nested between \aleph_0 and c , and that sooner or later a principle would be found that proved this. As of now no such principle’s ever been found. Gödel and [Georg] Cantor both died in confinement, bequeathing a world with no finite circumference. One that spins, now, in a new kind of all formal Void. [Yet m]athematics

continues to get out of bed.”⁴⁹¹ Any critical reading of Wallace must take this statement very seriously. He was deeply and intimately aware of a host of difficult subjects and fields, Cantorian set theory and transfinite mathematics being only the most clearly involved with the problems presented by infinity. And unlike postmodern critiques of representation and mediation, the fact that infinity could be abstractly represented and manipulated in a formal system like set theory—even if that system was understood always already as incomplete and inherently flawed—was for Wallace of the utmost importance. He was also intimately familiar with the revolutions in critical theory and poststructuralism during the 1960s-80s. It was this relationship, between the material though abstract mathematical conception of infinity and the limits of the text (or the infinite book), which Wallace pursued and questioned to exhaustive length in his work.

Bred upon Heidegger and the poststructuralists while attending Amherst, Arizona, and Harvard (briefly), he understood this transfinite engagement in textual terms, and oftentimes, in what I call *archival* terms. Wallace saw that the ontic limits of experience were increasingly defined along digital lines. The codes, screens, and apparatuses used to conduct information, the basic technology of late capitalism was, for Wallace, deeply textual. As he was greatly influenced by and precociously familiar with twentieth Century continental philosophy, critical theory, deconstruction, and American postmodern criticism, it is not surprising that he champions a familiarity with these discourses in his mostly overlooked first published essay. At the age of 24, while an MFA student, Wallace published his first novel, *The Broom of the System*, which he has called “a conversation between Wittgenstein and Derrida.”⁴⁹² A year later, Wallace was invited to write an essay on the state of US fiction in *The Review of Contemporary Literature*. In that article he wrote:

The climate for the “next” generation of American writers—should we decide to inhale rather than die—is aswirl with what seems like long-overdue appreciation for the weird achievements of such aliens as Husserl, Heidegger, Bakhtin, Lacan, Barthes, Poulet, Gadamer, de Man. The demise of Structuralism has changed a world’s outlook on language, art, and literary discourse; and the contemporary artists can simply no longer afford to regard the work of critics or theorists or philosophers—no matter how stratospheric—as divorced from their own concerns.⁴⁹³

In much of this essay, Wallace was responding to the new, cynical minimalism/realism of writers like Brett Easton Ellis and others,⁴⁹⁴ as well as what he considered to be a rampant anti-intellectualism in Creative Writing Programs. For such a young writer, being educated at a time when “French theory,” among other things, had inundated the academy, a familiarity with the achievements of poststructuralism could not but help to appear *de jure* to Wallace⁴⁹⁵ (whose own parents were academics in English and Philosophy⁴⁹⁶).

Because of the intellectual milieu Wallace inherited, he is oftentimes considered to be one of the first members of a generation succeeding literary postmodernism. This reading of Wallace is largely owed to Marshall Boswell’s study, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (2003), Wallace’s own essay, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” and a lengthy interview he conducted with McCaffery that appeared in a 1993 issue of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*. His relationship to poststructuralism, however, has largely been downplayed or simply overlooked in much of the criticism addressing his work up until this point. In fact, Wallace’s attention to postmodern fiction in “E Unibus Pluram” and its relationship to television has been taken almost as gospel by many critics, without regard for the intentional fallacy, while this earlier essay, stressing the importance of taking seriously the

achievements of such “aliens,” has been all-but-ignored before the recent surge in attention to his work.

That this perhaps should not be surprising is indeed a testament to Wallace’s achievement, as he has been able to effectively bridge the gap between art and criticism, theory and practice, in what might be considered, at least in 1996, a novel manner. If anything, the strength of Wallace’s work often rests on his hyperawareness of the mediation by which we experience the world, and ultimately, how relatively new this condition really is. If everything is text, then for Wallace everything is structured by the underlying codes, networks, and information that support those texts, those mediations. By inhabiting a theoretical stance throughout his body of work that takes the discursive nature of reality as a given, concedes that a text always already houses its own misreading or deconstruction, and acknowledges that the greatest “truth” of material existence might simply be the singular emergence of higher levels of order out of chaotic systems, Wallace, perhaps most impressively, resists being a cog in the culture industry despite his popularity. That he has been able to do so, in Fredric Jameson’s terms, requires one to think about the *new*.

We can now begin to move in the direction of a new description of the art object in general, or rather the new kinds of installations in which a “textual” process is immobilized in the current worldwide proliferation of postmodern artistic production. I’m trying to avoid the word “object,” still redolent of a modernist production of individual things, whether canvasses, scores that can be performed or repeated, or books that have boundaries and limits and that can be held in the memory (as opposed to those texts that, whether by fragmentation and imperfection or by a dizzying multiplication of presences

on the page, somehow evade form and reification—I guess I’m thinking of David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*).⁴⁹⁷

That Wallace, in an aesthetic regime now dominated by an acute encounter with poststructuralism—an encounter which has now reached the point of being blasé—could nevertheless “evade . . . reification,” according to Jameson, cannot be stressed enough.

Wallace’s aesthetic, from his first novel to his recently published posthumous work, can be considered, over-simply, as a resistance against reification. What Jameson notes about the “proliferation of postmodern artistic production,” is essentially that there is no *avant garde*, that there is virtually no art being made at the present moment not dominated by the reification so paradigmatic of the aesthetic regime of late capitalism. The most complex works of contemporary art are not complex as objects, but as *ideas*, as *theory*, and the culture industry has wholly absorbed this form of aesthetic complexity, something Wallace is intensely aware of in “E Unibus Pluram.” To be on the “cutting edge of art,” is to be on the cutting edge of theory, and as such, the distance between the artist and critic has blurred.

Let’s rather imagine that these newer works, or “texts” as it is more appropriate to call them, are mixtures of theory and singularity, which is to say that in some fashion they transcend the old opposition between a work and its criticism or interpretation that held for an aesthetic committed to the concept of the work in general, and to the security of closure and of reified form. Now that opposition—between the critic and the creator, the artist and the review—an opposition over which so much bad blood has been spilled at least since the eighteenth century—is no longer binding; and the critic has been transformed, has mutated, into something like the curator, or has indeed become indistinguishable from the writer himself.⁴⁹⁸

We might look to the likes of Jorge Luis Borges, Vladimir Nabokov, Umberto Eco, and William Gass, among many others, as examples of Jameson's point, but, as he emphasizes that *Infinite Jest* somehow escapes the reification such metacritically aware works produce, so too would we be right to pause a moment before grouping Wallace with such figures. As Zadie Smith conjectures, "certainly that unusual triune skill set—encyclopedic knowledge, mathematical prowess, complex dialectical thought—would have had an easier passage to approval within the academic world from which he hailed than in the literary world he joined."⁴⁹⁹ In Wallace's case, and I think Jameson would agree, the problem is not whether he formally resembles a critic-novelist hybrid, but rather that by the early 1980s, to make this distinction was already untenable and outdated.⁵⁰⁰ It is precisely with the awareness of the mutation of the critic, and by proxy the writer himself, that Wallace works and seeks to complicate.

One of the arguments I wish to put forward here is that whatever is new about Wallace, is not so merely in terms of his relationship to the literary postmodern, which is of course true and has largely begun to be explored by scholars such as Marshall Boswell and many others, but also that Wallace's access to texts, all kinds of texts, is equally novel and important. If the 1990s were a distinctly nuclear era simply because of the relative *absence* of the nuclear referent, they were so because of the ascendancy of communication and information technologies. Both formally, technically, scholarly, and critically—not to mention the fact that *Infinite Jest* is inundated with these technologies—Wallace presents a world that is tirelessly archival, a world in which not only textual production has increased exponentially, but also one's access to texts and information. Further, informational access is a fundamental base upon which he structures his writing; his project requires access, perhaps best summed up by what Hal Incandenza, protagonist of the first half of *Infinite Jest*, says to a cab-driver: "The library, and step on it."⁵⁰¹

Following this, I hesitate to coin a neologism for how I understand Wallace to be “new,” for often what sets him apart is his recognition of a kind of Kierkegaardian or Deleuzian repetition. Furthermore, for my purposes, the neologisms that have been spawned by Wallace’s newness are equally insufficient: “post-postmodernism,” “radical realism,” “the new sincerity,” and “high-postmodernism.” I would also like to suggest that Mark Fisher’s political and aesthetic mobilization of Michael Schudson’s term for certain types of advertising, “capitalist realism,” might be appropriate, though also insufficient.⁵⁰² Wallace’s own stance, as well as how critics have distinctly approached him as coming *after* something, however, would not necessarily be damaged by such a categorical neologism.

“E Unibus Pluram” has often been read as Wallace’s manifesto about whatever aesthetic approach might come *after* postmodernism. I would like to stress, however, that Wallace’s most crucial insight in that essay is not simply that US television had adopted the irony postmodern fiction had developed to such excruciatingly recursive length, but the deeper fact of the inescapable systematicity of this transformation. For, as he writes, “one of the most recognizable things about this century’s postmodern fiction has always been the movement’s strategic deployment of pop-cultural references—brand names, celebrities, television programs—in even its loftiest High Art projects.”⁵⁰³ This can easily be parsed as a kind of “capitalist realism,” but what is striking on a deeper level is that these discrete images and symbols are divorced from real meaning, *and we already know that*, regardless of whether or not these images and symbols are employed in advertising or “High Art.” What Wallace cannot do anymore is find this awareness altogether that novel, nor that upsetting. He argues, drawing upon the formal innovations of Pynchon, John Barth, Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, DeLillo and others, that “television’s self-mocking invitation to itself as indulgence, transgression, a glorious ‘giving in’

(again, not exactly foreign to addictive cycles) is one of two ingenious ways it's consolidated its six-hour hold on my generation's cojones. The other is postmodern irony."⁵⁰⁴ It is less-than-surprising to Wallace that a specific form like literary irony could infect the very non-literary, advertising, mass-entertainment system of television, and this infection would not merely blur the lines between high and low art, but erase those lines altogether. What Wallace is calling postmodern irony is an emergent property of 1990s US culture itself. Without faith in narrative, fully aware of the dominance of late capital, and in no condition to resist, let alone protest this condition,

the most frightening prospect, for the well-conditioned viewer, becomes leaving oneself open to others' ridicule by betraying passé expressions of value, emotion, or vulnerability. Other people become judges; the crime is naïveté. The well-trained viewer becomes even more allergic to people. [. . .] [F]urther viewing begins to seem almost like required research, lessons in the blank, bored, too-wise expression that Joe must learn how to wear for tomorrow's excruciating ride on the brightly lit subway, where crowds of blank, bored-looking people have little to look at but each other.⁵⁰⁵

Implicit in Wallace's criticism of the modern viewer is how much she resembles a particularly savvy humanities scholar or graduate student, someone who has been educated in the art of critical distance and doubt, and furthermore, someone who has been exposed to a staggering amount of aesthetic material.⁵⁰⁶ Though he does propose that a new generation of "sincere" writers might emerge from such hip, cynical malaise (and we may even suggest he was right), in a world in which a boiled down Heideggerian *Angst* became a lesson in basic social survival, the reification of the art object had become so complete that it ceased to be something to comment upon seriously with vitriolic ire. Yes, one could turn irony upon irony, or better yet, as so many

have argued Wallace himself strove to do (and accomplished), turn the meta-ironic handle so far that a strange sort of sincerity emerged, but in the end, the reasons for the cultural emergence of what others might call “cool,” the meme of contemporary ironic detachment, were far deeper than merely the vicissitudes of contemporary capitalism.

In “E Unibus Pluram” everything Wallace is analyzing is undergirded by the systems along which information flows. The transmission of codes, the conveyance of information, in short, language games, are thrust into increasingly complex relationships with other information, to the point where there is no stable origin point from which to really consider any of the resultant hybridities. With the proliferation of new nodes, new networks, and a host of new information to flow between participants with almost entirely unparsable rules, it is no wonder that television adapted the complexities of postmodern aesthetic production. In response, Tom LeClair argues, in a slightly overlooked essay, that Wallace and “these younger writers more thoroughly conceive their fictions as information systems, as long-running programs of data with collaborative genesis.”⁵⁰⁷ By anticipating the very transformation of the aesthetic object into not merely another commercial product (like Warhol), but more drastically, to divest the object of any real importance whatsoever, to acknowledge from the beginning that the object is always already *yet more* connected information within mountainous streams of data, information without perceptible difference between signal and noise, Wallace achieves what I will call *hyperarchival realism*.

An excellent example of this hyperarchival realism is buried in a footnote to an endnote following a not uncharacteristically long sentence from *Infinite Jest*. This sentence, discussing the father of the protagonist of the first half of the novel, cannot help but suggest lengthy quotation:

His strategic value, during the Federal interval G. Ford-early G. Bush, as more or less the top applied-geometrical-optics man in the O.N.R. and S.A.C., designing neutron-scattering reflectors for thermo-strategic weapons systems, then in the Atomic Energy Commission—where his development of gamma-refractive indices for lithium-anodized lenses and panels is commonly regarded as one of the big half-dozen discoveries that made possible cold annular fusion and approximate energy-independence for the U.S. and its various allies and protectorates—his optical acumen translated, after an early retirement from the public sector, into a patented fortune in rearview mirrors, light-sensitive eyewear, holographic birthday and Xmas greeting cartridges, videophonic Tableaux, homolosine-cartography software, nonfluorescent public-lighting systems and film-equipment; then, in the optative retirement from hard science that building and opening a U.S.T.A-accredited and pedagogically experimental tennis academy apparently represented for him, into “après-garde” experimental- and conceptual-film work too far either ahead of or behind its time, possibly, to be much appreciated at the time of his death in the Year of the Trial-Size Dove Bar—although a lot of it (the experimental- and conceptual-film work) was admittedly just plain pretentious and unengaging and bad, and probably not helped at all by the man’s very gradual spiral into the crippling dipsomania of his late father.⁵⁰⁸

Filled with an almost paralyzing amount of information, Wallace’s syntax here is not only maddeningly precise, it is wholly in the service of character description. This is not a character that can be described by the brand logo on their t-shirt. An effluvium of information: historical allusions, high-level optical science,⁵⁰⁹ the development of nuclear technology during the Cold War, film engineering, experimental art—all of these are present, topped off with a metafictional

realization that even the very sentence this impressive archival descriptive feat is taking place in may be “pretentious and unengaging and bad,” but nevertheless follows with a key piece of plot information heavy in emotional affect: the father’s crippling dipsomania. Wallace’s syntax seems to at times require logorrhea, of course exacerbated by the nine-page endnote attached to this sentence detailing the character’s (James Orin Incandenza’s) filmography.

The hyperarchivally realist moment occurs one further level down, as Wallace gives us the source for this filmography in a footnote to the title to the endnote:

a. From Comstock, Posner, and Duquette, ‘The Laughing Pathologists: Exemplary Works of the Anticonfluent *Après Garde*: Some Analyses of the Movement Toward Stasis in North American Conceptual Film (w/ Beth B., Vivienne Dick, James O. Incandenza, Vigdis Simpson, E. and K. Snow.’ *ONANite Film and Cartridge Studies Annual*, vol. 8, nos. 1-3 (Year of the D.P. from the A.H.), pp. 44-117.⁵¹⁰

Unlike the longer sentence which this footnote is attached to, it cannot be read without some knowledge of the world in which a book or work like that would appear. The description of Incandenza,⁵¹¹ though obsessively compulsive, simply requires a better-than-working knowledge of the English language, a good dictionary, and a reference work or two. But beyond information readily available to someone at a university library, the world of the novel is in a state of becoming during this very sentence (while simultaneously being self-contained). The footnote, on the other hand, could not be more opaque. At least some knowledge of the fact *Infinite Jest* takes place in an imagined 2009 is required, and that various political and historical developments in that world have occasioned particular peculiarities in the citation (“Year of the D.P. from the A.H.”⁵¹² for instance).⁵¹³ Furthermore, and it should be clear, there is a host of information that is *wholly* unnecessary to any aspect of the novel whatsoever other than it

reinforces the novel's *form* (page numbers, volume numbers, many of the names, etc.).⁵¹⁴

Information, functioning at this many levels of mediation and recursion to the text proper, accumulates and multiplies, creating hermeneutic circles ungraspable by anything other than an awareness of the metacritical recursivity of archival form. And of course, the title to the chapter of the book (whose own title carries the historical marker of the Organization of North American Nations, or ONAN [of course also a reference to Onan in the Bible or masturbation (the self-reflexivity now doubling back on the very presence of such a footnote to such a sentence in the first place—an acknowledgment of the masturbatory quality of his own engorged syntax and writing style)]). . . the title itself does not sound unfamiliar to anyone operating in an academic environment whose very task is to interpret and read such footnotes as this one, while simultaneously quite clearly revealing how aesthetic production might evolve post-1996 when *Infinite Jest* appeared, etc., *ad nauseum*.

If Wallace's monologically consistent logorrhea at times can grate, often verging on an exercise in exhaustion, it is not by accident. John Barth's classic essay, "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967), is one patricidal target for much of Wallace's work. Apropos the context in which it was written—while Barth was a faculty member of the State University of New York, Buffalo in 1967—he wrote of the apocalyptic fervor with which literature was then being treated:

Whether historically the novel expires or persists as a major art form seems immaterial to me; if enough writers and critics *feel* apocalyptic about it, their feeling becomes a considerable cultural fact, like the *feeling* that Western civilization, or the world, is going to end rather soon. If you took a bunch of people out into the desert and the world didn't end, you'd come home shamefaced, I imagine; but the persistence of an art form doesn't invalidate work created in the comparable apocalyptic ambience.⁵¹⁵

The crisis in American letters, on both the critical and creative sides of the aisle, had not abated by the time Wallace composed his response to Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse" (1967), "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way,"⁵¹⁶ but what Wallace wanted to end once and for all was the very *conversation*, the discursive mode that approached art as something ending or being on the precipice of ending. Whether the end had already occurred, would never occur, or what have you, was not so much the point as simply exploring the very question that, as it would occasion such metafictionally recursive labyrinths, it could also occasion investigations on how to end the question itself.

If Wallace failed in this task, it was because the very system of informational promulgation that makes such aesthetic production possible in the first place is simultaneously the system's capability of deleting any information whatsoever. Furthermore, the network latencies and server crashes inherent in any such complex system, the rules broken in the language game, the signifiers under erasure, the transcursive infinities spiraling in Gödelian loops—these things cannot be helped. They are abstract materialities faced in any emergent system, and it takes time to find a metaphorical language to represent them. If Wallace took Derrida's notion of the structural capacities of absence seriously, he did so in foregrounding an anti-eschatological stance wholly appropriate to a historical period in which it seemed possible that, though the US had lost its national fantasy, it not only could exist in a world without such a narrative, but possibly thrive. Though in no way could he be said to have achieved such a thing, and in fact, he is at times prophetically apocalyptic in *Infinite Jest*, Wallace nonetheless attempts to explore a history without end.

This attempt takes many forms. *The Broom of the System*, by explicitly invoking Ludwig Wittgenstein while erasing Derrida from the text, announces a literary goal: how to go beyond

the apocalyptic crises of language, texts, networks, information systems, and social communication. Though many consider it a failure, it not only lays an important lexical foundation for the rest of Wallace's work, something he later commented upon at length in "Authority and American Usage" (1999), it does so through a theoretical encounter between two of the most grammatically rigorous Twentieth-Century thinkers, Wittgenstein and Derrida. Ultimately, as Wallace realized fiction necessitated accumulation—that because language was never static a text must always participate in a unique, never-to-be-repeated language game, and furthermore, that this experience was fundamentally positive both for humans and the various languages they spoke—the apocalypticism often associated with poststructuralism proved too narrow for a fictional project that was to span decades, and the bright aspects of Wittgenstein's later conclusions in *Philosophical Investigations* prevailed, a victory that would continually prove productive for Wallace.

Broom was also particularly effective on this front through its presentation, destruction, and transformation of certain parts of the American landscape, specifically through its creation of the Great Ohio Desert, or GOD, a 100 square mile manmade wasteland in Ohio. If this shows nothing else than a familiarity with Leo Marx's book, *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), then this also must mark a key node around which Wallace's (anti-)apocalyptic stance gets mobilized in fictional form, as well as describing a relationship with an American literary tradition, one he is not only keenly entering into, but commenting upon as well. But this is also to say that the very landscape that appears in this fictional world is a product of the text that engenders it. Wallace's decision to end the novel mid-sentence, presumably omitting the word "word," does not accept the idea that the space of textual production, the landscape of the text, is an apocalyptic one.

The novella “Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way” continues Wallace’s project in a much more incisive and specific manner, taking as a model for its more than 150 pages John Barth’s short story “Lost in the Funhouse.” Through a long car journey to Collision, Illinois, where the commercial to end all commercials will be shot at the gathering of everyone that had ever appeared in a McDonald’s commercial, Wallace mirrors Barth’s story to the point of plagiarism. Here he is at his most explicit concerning the crisis facing literary production, and fiction in particular. One reviewer has stressed that he is so plagued by influence that he has, extending Harold Bloom’s metaphor, a “panic of influence,”⁵¹⁷ but this wholly misses the point. Wallace *knew* about Bloom’s “anxiety of influence,”⁵¹⁸ sure, to the point of panic, but he was so self-aware of this influence that he did not flinch at making John Barth a character in the story, as well as himself, his fellow classmates, perhaps a female love interest, and his own literary future. Of course, “Westward” is also self aware of its metafictional labyrinths, and what they might signify, what being aware of being aware of these labyrinths might mean, etc. *ad nauseam*.

What should be stressed about “Westward” is not merely Wallace’s relationship to literary postmodernism in general and Barth in particular, but that it was a logical and necessary next step in developing an anti-eschatological aesthetic, one that could critique apocalyptic discourse past the point of absurdity, to emerge out of the other end with a coherent and serious literary project. Even if “Westward” ultimately is a failure—which it is not despite Wallace’s urging that it is⁵¹⁹—hardly matters, for if it does nothing else, the structural supports it constructs—aesthetically, theoretically, and ethically—are absolutely necessary for the serious work to follow, namely *Infinite Jest*. What Wallace achieves in “Westward” is the possibility not only of what so many have called a *post*-postmodernism (a term I find problematic and not terribly useful), but a world that could be both projected and inhabited after the dissolution of

post-nuclear grand narrative. It is no coincidence that Wallace's anti-eschatological aesthetic finds its most cogent expression in literary formal terms in a year that saw similar political upheavals, namely the fall of the Berlin Wall. "Sarcasm, parody, absurdism and irony are great ways to strip off stuff's mask and show the unpleasant reality behind it. The problem is that once the rules for art are debunked, and once the unpleasant realities the irony diagnoses are revealed and diagnosed, *then* what do we do? Irony's useful for debunking illusions, but most of the illusion-debunking in the U.S. has now been done and redone."⁵²⁰ Irony's usefulness in debunking illusions, or as Nietzsche put it, penetrating the veil of *māyā*, is for Wallace *itself* not only an illusion, but something that can be ironized to the point of shutting down any apocalypticism, any faith, belief, expectance, or hope in *revelation* whatsoever. To massively overly simplify, the world into which Wallace was writing, the world "Westward" allowed him to enter, was one in which to even *talk* about the ending of a grand historical narrative was suspect, a rhetoric that should and would be critically deconstructed to the point of stasis. No longer could we look at such "serious" projections of technological destruction without irony, and furthermore, an irony wholly infused with a profound sense of the disaster(s) of the twentieth Century.

It is through this lens that *Infinite Jest* should primarily be read. Though it is surely a novel deserving considerable critical attention, it is always already so brutally aware of how it might be read, perceived, and commented upon, that to do so places one immediately in Wallace's very narrative predicament after "Westward."⁵²¹ It should come as no surprise, then, that in a novel so metacritically aware, the primary apocalyptic threat is *text itself*. The "end of the end," the nuclear critical task of reading literature in light of its disappearance, is actualized in *Infinite Jest*; the nuclear bomb, through its relative absence in the post-1989 political sphere,

finally *destroys* the text, and we are left with remainders of remainders—and it destroys the text by becoming text in text (*ad infinitum*) by *accumulation*. In *Infinite Jest*, there is a short film made by Incandenza: the Entertainment, also known as *Infinite Jest (V)*,⁵²² also known as the “*samizdat*,” of which, presumably, only one master copy exists. This film causes anyone who watches it to become so enamored with it that they lose all desire and will to do anything else but watch it. Doing so, of course, results in death, as the viewer/reader ceases eating, moving, drinking, or using the bathroom. Its threatened mass-dissemination would result in millions of potential deaths. *This* is the apocalypse marking the novel’s horizon. We should understand from this particular, and quite ingenious apocalypse, that Wallace’s novel might very well always already be the Entertainment, or at least is engaging in the very same recursive entertainment/exhaustion that he sees metafiction participating in. For, even though Wallace unabashedly accumulates text, there is always a certain apocalyptic guilt in him for doing so—there is awareness on his part that there may very well be something perhaps quite dangerous in literature, in text; when one reveals the textuality of the text within a historical period marked on all sides by textual *absence*, *more* text might not be the answer, and in fact, *accumulation* may define the nuclear technology as much as its destructive capabilities.

In *Infinite Jest*, the nuclear and apocalyptic recursively and repeatedly *emerge* out of text itself; the archive is apocalyptic, the end is a singularity emerging out of the collection and ordering of multiplicitous rhetorical, discursive, literary, and textual eschatons. This is not accounting for its bulk, its nearly 400 endnotes, or its lexical overflow. Nor does it account for how the nuclear *does* appear in the text: as an elaborate nuclear war simulation played on a tennis court, and as the potential yet ambiguous possibility that the US inverted nuclear missiles in their silos and detonated them. These two moments, transcribed by the apocalyptic horizon of

the Entertainment, are paradigmatic images of nuclear technology in American literature. With the exception of Pynchon's final image in *Gravity's Rainbow*, there are perhaps no two richer nuclear "representations." As such, though it is difficult to read *Infinite Jest* not as some sort of culmination of a narrative of nuclear-literary development, it is also quite easy to read it as a *beginning*, or at least something new.

After *Infinite Jest*, overt apocalyptic themes are nearly completely absent from Wallace's work. This is not to suggest, however, that his later work is of less importance to a nuclear critical stance somehow, nor that it wholly transcends the problems he was so aware of up until *Infinite Jest*. His subsequent work in a multitude of arenas, however, could be seen as an expression of a project completed, an anti-eschatological mode achieved. No longer did one need textual over-accumulation, but rather micro-investigations of various problems, especially what it means for individual subjects to exist in what might be thought of as a post-*Infinite Jest* world—these took precedence over huge narratives with huge concerns. Consequently, though it is of less importance for my purposes here, it should not be overlooked that Wallace's relevance to this discussion does not end with *Infinite Jest*, but that it quite simply finds its most coherent and complete expression therein.

4.2 GARDENING THE MACHINE: NARRATIVE LIMINALITY AND *THE BROOM OF THE SYSTEM*

The twentieth century will undoubtedly have discovered the related categories of exhaustion, excess, the limit, and transgression—the strange and unyielding form of these irrevocable movements which consume and consummate us.

Throughout *The Broom of the System*, Lenore Beadsman, protagonist and telephone operator in the Bombardini Building for the publishing company Frequent & Vigorous, experiences a repetitive technological problem: telephone calls do not arrive at their intended destination and conditions somewhere in the Bombardini Building are to blame.⁵²⁴ Near the end of the novel a repairman who’d been inspecting the telephone problem for weeks revealed to Lenore that, because a sub-basement communications and cable tunnel was somehow being kept at a steady 98.6°, the “‘sub par service is due to your lines are bleeding calls into each other because somehow your tunnel’s ninety-eight point six goddamn degrees,’” that “‘it’s kind of decided it’s a real freakin’ human being or something.’”⁵²⁵ At the center of this problem, Lenore knows, is her great-grandmother, Lenore Beadsman Sr., former student of Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose body-temperature must be maintained at a steady 98.6° by medical necessity. Lenore Sr.’s absence throughout *Broom*, from her mysterious disappearance from a nursing home, to the manifestation of that absence (or subterranean “presence”) as material disruption in the means of communication, is of immense structural importance throughout the novel.

She represents, dialectically, one side of a teleological horizon the novel repetitively and continuously posits and revolves around. Primarily she plays a stand-in for Wittgenstein, but by doing so reveals a narrative limit, an eschatological boundary whose transgression would destroy the narrative itself. Lenore Sr. has only left behind “her notebooks, yellow and crispy, old, and her copy of the *Investigations*, and a small piece of fuzzy white paper, which actually turned out to be a torn-off label from another jar of Stonecipheco food. Creamed peach. On the white back of the label something was doodled. There was nothing else in the drawer. Which is to say there

was no *green* book in the drawer.”⁵²⁶ (We are also pretty sure she used a mnemonic-enhancing drug on a cockatiel, who goes on to become a Christian talk show host.) In other words, Lenore Sr. is a fairly blunt theoretical construct, a character who primarily serves to represent one side in a theoretical exploration. She reads Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (1953). She was one of his students. Her physical presence is enough to scramble technological communication because she ultimately disrupts the material context or medium (the temperature) required for communication itself to function properly. And, she has the *green notebook*. As so much of Wittgenstein’s work was unpublished in his lifetime, the presence/absence of this notebook implies within the space of the novel that there is further work he did beyond *The Blue and Brown Books* (1958) and the *Philosophical Investigations*, and that somehow Lenore Sr. has special knowledge of how, to quite literally, *go beyond Wittgenstein*. Lenore Sr.

has, from what little I can gather, convinced Lenore [Jr.] that she is in possession of some words of tremendous power. No, really. Not things, or concepts. Words. The woman is apparently obsessed with words. . . . Words and a book and a belief that the world is words and Lenore’s conviction that her own intimate personal world is only of, neither by nor for, her. Something is not right. She is in pain. I would like the old lady to die in her sleep.⁵²⁷

Lenore Jr.’s pain results primarily from her fear that she is a fictional construct, a text, a character in a novel. The irony that she indeed *is*, however, is not really Wallace’s point of exploration here. Rather, it serves to reveal how Wallace is reading Wittgenstein.

For him, Wittgenstein’s work in the *Investigations* has apocalyptic implications. Namely, the horrors of solipsism. If we are in many ways constructed by language, what happens when language is no longer possible because there is no one to converse with? When there is only one

lonely mind operating without discursive social context? In many ways, for this early novel it is easy to see Wallace struggling with what it meant to *be* a novelist. If the language on the page only exists in the isolation of the text, and furthermore, the world it describes cannot be anything except textual, how does one escape recursive solipsism? How is one anything except a *name*?

Wittgenstein's answer deserves lengthy quotation:

“What the names in language signify might be indestructible; for it must be possible to describe the state of affairs in which everything destructible is destroyed. And this description will contain words; and what corresponds to these cannot then be destroyed, or otherwise the words would have no meaning.” I must not saw off the branch on which I am sitting.

One might, of course, object at once that this description would have to except itself from the destruction.—But what corresponds to the separate words of the description and so cannot be destroyed if it is true, is what gives words their meaning—is that without which they would have no meaning.—In a sense, however, this man is surely what corresponds to his name. But he is destructible, and his name does not lose its meaning when the bearer is destroyed.—An example of something corresponding to the name, and without which it would have no meaning, is a paradigm that is used in connexion with the name in the language game.⁵²⁸

The problem with this, in eschatological terms, is that: what if that word only exists as *text*? For it is possible to destroy text, to quite literally destroy Lenore Beadsman Jr. and the textual world she inhabits by erasing *The Broom of the System*, by deleting it. It might be then said, that by reading Wittgenstein in such a fashion, Wallace can be seen as attempting to exorcise his own anxiety as a first novelist, a novelist whose own text might be erased—i.e. not read, published,

etc.—and through this exorcism consequently contends with the act of writing a novel as a potentially selfish, lonely, and narcissistic act.

In an early essay, on David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (1988), Wallace wrote that the novel succeeds in doing what few philosophers glean & what neither myriad biographical sketches nor Duffy's lurid revisionism succeeds in communicating: the consequences, for persons, of the *practice of theory*; the difference, say, between espousing 'solipsism' as a metaphysical 'position' & waking up one fine morning after a personal loss to find your grief apocalyptic, literally millennial, leaving you the last and only living thing on earth, with only your head, now, for not only company but environment & world, an inclined beach sliding toward a dreadful sea.⁵²⁹

More of a critical manifesto than a proper book review, Wallace's assessment of Markson clearly expresses his apocalyptic reading of Wittgenstein. But it also reveals to Wallace why he's "starting to think most people who somehow must write must write."⁵³⁰ Lenore Sr. functions, both in terms of being a character in the novel and a stand-in for Wittgenstein, as a foil, a limit within which the world of the text must always operate, a boundary necessary for any language game to be played whatsoever, while simultaneously being a danger to the very act of communication itself.

Wallace's decision to end the novel by erasing the word "*word*," contends with this limit in a complex way. In *Broom*'s final line, Rick Vigorous says, "'You can trust me. . . I'm a man of my[.]'"⁵³¹ By omitting "*word*," Wallace blatantly calls attention to the textuality of the text. We *know* the final word is "*word*." Something in language has given us to understand that what the entire novel was attempting to communicate was simple: a "*word*." But furthermore, we know that the final word of the novel, what it was attempting to communicate could have

perhaps been *anything*, say, “rutabaga” or Wittgenstein’s philosophical grunt, and the only way we ever have of knowing is the linguistic context in which it appears; but because this word is absent, that this linguistic moment was not provided, we can never truly know if whatever the novel was attempting to communicate actually comes across. This, in many ways, is a kind of inversion of Pynchon’s final line of *The Crying of Lot 49*.⁵³² Rather than fulfilling the language game promised by the title, by the name, Wallace’s novel refuses to acknowledge that even a “word” has a stable meaning, that it fulfills the rules of the language game. There is, however, another reading of this moment that to my knowledge no one has yet suggested. And this reading represents the other teleological limit of the text, Norman Bombardini’s “eating to infinite largeness.”

Early on in the novel, the character of Norman Bombardini, owner of the Bombardini Building, decides to eat, consume, incorporate, etc., the entire universe. He decides, after both a disastrous divorce and experience with Weight Watchers, that “Weight Watchers holds as a descriptive axiom the transparently true fact that for each of us the universe is deeply and sharply and completely divided into for example in my case, me, on one side, and everything else, on the other. This for each of us exhaustively defines the whole universe, Vigorous. The whole universe. Self and Other.”⁵³³ Holding to this, it follows that Weight Watchers, in attempting to decrease one’s weight, is *ipso facto* suggesting that there must be as much other and as little self as possible. Bombardini has taken the other tack.

“We each ought to desire our own universe to be as *full* as possible, that the Great Horror consists in an empty, rattling personal universe, one where one finds oneself with Self, on one hand, and vast empty lonely spaces before Others begin to enter the picture at all, on the other. . . . Rather than diminishing Self to entice Other to fill our universe, we may

also of course obviously choose to fill the universe with *Self*. . . . Yes. I plan to grow to infinite size.”⁵³⁴

What has not been suggested about the novel, however, is that Bombardini actually accomplishes his goal, that he did in fact apocalyptically become the universe.

There is evidence to support such a reading. At the climax of the plot arc, Bombardini, now quite massive indeed, is throwing his entire weight against the Bombardini Building (which he owns), causing it to shake, and adding the (unrealized) potential for a quite real disaster to the final confrontation between many of the most significant characters. The narrative proper pretty much ends here, with a final dénouement of Rick Vigorous providing the subsequent story. Other than the final scene with Vigorous, we don’t encounter any of the characters again, and he, it could be said, is merely there to begin to “speak” the last unuttered word. Nor do we really get an account of what Bombardini’s ultimate fate might be. Wallace, even this early in his career, is committing himself to a kind of aesthetic anti-eschatology—i.e., he often omits the most crucial points of narrative information in the text proper, and almost always eschews an “ending,” leaving events and how one might read those events ambiguous, hazy, and open to interpretation. The irresolution of Bombardini’s narcissistic, eschatological fate, should then strike one as significant (in the same way that the absence of the word “word” is significant). The possibility that Bombardini *did* in fact achieve his goal presents the possibility that he in fact *consumed* Vigorous and the world, that the text *ends*, in that the world ends by becoming all Bombardini, but it ends by simultaneously avoiding completion, by having the text resist being a whole that could be consumed in its entirety.

As stated earlier, Bombardini should be read as the dialectical opposite of Lenore Sr., a teleological limit that, if not exactly reached, structures the novel at its most basic level. The

novel is everywhere concerned with the problems of communication, especially how they manifest between the aporia self and other. Bombardini makes imaginatively possible not simply a fairly obvious critique of the American consumer, but an eschaton that can be reached through *accumulation*. Lenore Sr., paradoxically enough, embodies what might be called the *threat* of language, the reifying threat toward the subject when the self is seen as possibly nothing more than a linguistic construction. This threat, if not clearly destructive, empties the subject of presence, and potentially even body, all the while withholding that one transcendent, revelatory word the green book might contain. On the one hand, being consumed into Bombardini's "Project Total Yang," is completely destructive—it erases the other—but on the other hand, it is completely unifying. Bombardini's apocalypse is one that cannot really be said to have been completed. For, if the final "word" of the novel has been erased, then there is always something that resists the all-absorptive quality of "eating to infinite largeness." The word is not uttered, nor written down, and consequently cannot be consumed. Infinite accumulation—apocalypse through absorption—is ultimately impossible, for the very same reason that counting to infinity is impossible. And on Lenore Sr.'s side, language might be eminently destructible, but there is always some name left behind.

And it is no accident this name is in fact "Lenore." Lenore *Jr.* is the textual void, the supplement resisting the narrative's reification, as the novel as a whole does by refusing to complete itself on its last "word." Unlike Oedipa Maas, Lenore asks not, "can she project a world?" but rather, "am I the world's projection, an emergent signal from the background noise, the surrounding texts?" For Wallace, Lenore was an unambiguous autobiographical projection, a writing of the young, aspiring, unsure, deeply (and textually) unsettled novelist-self right into the ribs of *The Broom of the System*. One of the central problems in Lenore's world is that she is in

charge of directing communication to the appropriate people, but the wrong connections are being made within the network. She quite literally cannot read the incoming and outgoing language. And this is not because there is something inherent in language that breaks down, but rather it is the system along which these codes are transmitted that is flawed. Novelistic discourse itself, understood as a kind of systemic irony, becomes for Wallace a mode of problematizing what is transmitted from one node to the next, how a particular random assemblage begins to take on order.

By projecting Lenore futuristically into the year 1990 in Cleveland, Ohio, Wallace is forcing the text to inhabit a landscape marked by *ordered breakdown*. One of the more clever aspects of the novel is the manufacturing of the Great Ohio Desert, or GOD. In 1972, the governor of Ohio felt that,

“Guys, the state is getting soft. I can feel softness there. It’s getting to be one big suburb and industrial park and mall. Too much development. People are getting complacent. They’re forgetting the way this state was historically hewn out of wilderness. There’s no more hewing. . . . We need a wasteland. . . . a desert. A point of savage reference for the good people of Ohio. A place to fear and love. A blasted region. Something to remind us of what we hewed out of. A place without malls. An Other for Ohio’s Self.”⁵³⁵

The result was a tourist destination, a great blasted landscape with black sand. Lenore must inhabit, traverse, and commune with this desert space. To reverse Leo Marx’s famous formulation, it is her garden in the machine.⁵³⁶ Or, more realistically, her wasteland in the machine. The world of Ohio in *Broom*’s projected 1990s is a thoroughly developed, machinic landscape—indeed a network of human relationships having totally replaced any “wilderness” (to the point that one suburban development is “in the shape of a profile of Jayne Mansfield”⁵³⁷).

Consequently, the citizens of Ohio, rather than go commune with nature in some protected wilderness area, go to a manufactured post-apocalyptic wasteland—ordered like a garden, built, maintained, but ultimately more savage than the landscape that was there in the first place. We must consequently look at the GOD less as some kind of clever joke on Wallace's part, and take its existence and manufacture seriously. Within the logic of *Broom*, something like the GOD must exist, its emergence from the surrounding suburban noise is necessitated by the very chaos of the systems structuring the network which keep failing. The desert is a kind of ordered deconstruction, a breakdown necessitated by the ubiquitous (though failed) connectivity of a projected future. Rather than intrude upon the pastoral, the pastoral is hewn from the machine, not giving the illusion of some restored, idyllic past, but projecting a post-apocalyptic present instead.

The GOD, and specifically Lenore Jr.'s experience there, functions as an object of narrative synthesis, of dialectical resolution. It is simultaneously assembled, made, accumulated, while always already being a space of destruction. For Lenore to experience the desert is to allow her, quite literally, to complete the novel she is in. She finds an appropriate male love interest, moves away from the influence of her family, and escapes the parasitic Vigorous once and for all. The desert is a kind of textual space that materializes the narrative's limits, the limits of Bombardini and Lenore Sr., while simultaneously making possible the narrative's forward movement, for Wallace to begin his project from a space that rigorously ironized liminality itself while still achieving affective narrative cohesion.

Many, including Wallace himself, have perceived *Broom* as a failure, a piece of juvenilia too self-aware and anxious to succeed in its literary project. And though some have contended otherwise,⁵³⁸ it should not surprise us that *Broom* might in fact be a failure. It continually fails to

aesthetically harmonize its various structural elements in favor of theoretically exploring what it means to be constructing such elements in the first place. In the words of Theodor Adorno: “What is qualitatively new in recent art may be that in an allergic reaction it wants to eliminate harmonizations even in their negated form, truly the negation of negation with its own fatality: the self-satisfied transition to a new positivity, to the absence of tension in so many paintings and compositions of the postwar decades.”⁵³⁹ If narrative textuality is a thing to be deconstructed, an object whose eschatological limits must be, if not transgressed or really reached, but structure and form the object itself, then Wallace’s failure results from his attempts to negate the object’s own destruction and fatality, to negate this negation. In *beginning* his career from a formally anti-eschatological stance, having already exhausted ends at his “origin,” he is able to structurally begin something new. This structure permits attending to the apocalyptic linearity of postmodern metafictional narrative itself.

The “failure” of *Broom*, if it can indeed be located, was always already inscribed into Wallace’s first attempt at a novel. The novel’s other philosophical guide-post had already done an impressive amount of work in exploding the textual foundations upon which Wallace might have stood, and he was acutely aware of this fact. For him to be able to actually contend with literary narrative, with the history of American literature, he had to contend with the theoretical milieu he was writing into first. And to do this, he had to explore the fluidity of liminal structures, and the implications of transgression. If Lenore Sr. is absent, a phantom, a name without material signification, a name that cannot be destroyed even if it ceases corresponding to a living breathing being, we must understand this absence to also “signify” another phantom: Jacques Derrida.

Wallace firmly felt, from the very beginning of his career, the critical importance that revolutions in theory and philosophy had to have on any of the fiction being composed in theory's wake. No longer could he seriously contend with his literary forebears, to say nothing of something like Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence," without first contending with the theoretical landscape of the era. In other words, to compose a novel like *Broom*, obsessively concerned with its structure as it is, Wallace took the lessons of Derrida very seriously, and perhaps especially Derrida's early and important critique of structuralism:

And again on the basis of what we call the center (and which, because it can be either inside or outside, can also indifferently be called the origin or the end, *archē* or *telos*), repetitions, substitutions, transformations, and permutations are always *taken* from a history of meaning [*sens*]⁵⁴⁰—that is, in a word, a history—whose origin may always be reawakened or whose end may always be anticipated in the form of presence. This is why one perhaps could say that the movement of any archaeology, like that of any eschatology, is an accomplice of this reduction of the structurality of structure and always attempts to conceive of structure on the basis of a full presence which is beyond play.

To parse this in terms of the novel, we would do well to again refer to Norman Bombardini, and especially his own phantom-like nature at the end of *Broom*. In Bombardini's world of total-self, there cannot be a center, for a center would imply that there is some subject who is Norman Bombardini in the first place. In addition, such a universe would have no coherent "*archē*" or "*telos*," no origin or end. It would be a narrative-textual space that could never be an accomplice of eschatology, for it would be a kind of "universe without organs,"⁵⁴¹ a vast physical region with no distinction between any one thing and another. If there is an anxiety in Wallace, the figure of Bombardini signals a problematic obsessively pursued on his part: namely, that

language, and thus textuality (to say nothing of narrative yet), prevented, before one even started, the possibility for fashioning coherent meaning in something that had to first pursue the question of the “structurality of structure”—i.e. the self-awareness of fashioning an aesthetic object. *Broom* understands the failure inherent in any structural project, in attempting to refashion some solid ontological ground upon which to then proceed in the wake of poststructuralism, and especially in the form of a novel.

Ultimately, *Broom*’s “failure” allowed him to acknowledge that structural aporias—namely those of any eschatologies whatsoever—could not be resolved in a form obsessed by those very aporias. Acknowledging this allowed him to then turn toward the historical, material archive of American fiction, and specifically the work of John Barth. Such a turn further allowed him to confront various historical materialities, namely the effect on narrative and American fiction that nuclear and information technology had.

4.3 THE THREAT OF THE TEXT: IRONIC APOCALYPSE AND “WESTWARD THE COURSE OF EMPIRE TAKES ITS WAY”

There is disaster only because, ceaselessly, it falls short of disaster. The end of nature, the end of culture.

—Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*⁵⁴²

He dreams of a funhouse vaster by far than any yet constructed; but by then they may be out of fashion, like steamboats and excursion trains.

—John Barth, “Lost in the Funhouse”⁵⁴³

One of the most persistent fears Wallace's work revolves around is the suspicion that there may be something actually quite *dangerous* about literature, both in its composition and its contemplation.⁵⁴⁴ Somewhere within the dialogic interaction between text and reader, and between author and writing, Wallace saw contemporary American literature following a potentially catastrophic path of recursivity and self-conscious irony despite the exhaustive and commendable lengths postmodern metafiction had pursued to complicate these dialogic relationships and to strip them of any pretense of transparency or authenticity. For a US culture so often criticized as narcissistic and historically ignorant, as apocalyptically self-absorbed with the reproduction of itself, the dangers of postmodern self-consciousness, of the text spiraling into total solipsism, could not help but be felt acutely by Wallace.

In "Octet," a short story from his collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999),⁵⁴⁵ Wallace locates (as he so often does) part of this danger in the very act of writing itself. An example of this occurs, among many other places, in a quite lengthy footnote that deserves full quotation simply for its incredible syntax:

(Though it all gets a little complicated, because part of what you want these little Pop Quizzes to do is to break the textual fourth wall and kind of address (or "interrogate") the reader directly, which desire is somehow related to the old "meta"-device desire to puncture some sort of fourth wall of realist pretense, although it seems like the latter is less a puncturing of any sort of real wall and more a puncturing of the veil of impersonality or effacement around the writer himself, i.e. with the now-tired S.O.P. "meta"-stuff it's more the dramatist himself coming onstage from the wings and reminding you that what's going on is artificial and that the artificer is him (the

dramatist) and but that he's at least respectful enough of you as reader/audience to be honest about the fact that he's back there pulling the strings, an "honesty" which personally you've always had the feeling is actually a highly rhetorical sham-honesty that's designed to get you to like him and approve of him (i.e., of the "meta"-type writer) and feel flattered that he apparently thinks you're enough of a grownup to handle being reminded that what you're in the middle of is artificial (like you didn't know that already, like you needed to be reminded of it over and over again as if you were a myopic child who couldn't see what was right in front of you), which more than anything seems to resemble the type of real-world person who tries to manipulate you into liking him by making a big deal of how open and honest and unmanipulative he's being all the time, a type who's even more irritating than the sort of person who tries to manipulate you by just flat-out lying to you, since at least the latter isn't constantly congratulating himself for not doing precisely what the self-congratulation itself ends up doing, viz. not interrogating you or have any sort of interchange or even really *talking* to you but rather just *performing* in some highly self-conscious and manipulative sort of way.

None of that was very clearly put and might well ought to get cut. It may be that none of this real-narrative-honesty-v.-sham-narrative-honesty stuff can even be talked about up front.)⁵⁴⁶

This appears in a story whose stated goal from the outset is to "question" the reader by giving them little narrative "quizzes" which tend to be morally problematic or ambiguous. The writer, however, in the act of questioning, is forced to ask himself what it even means to be writing such meta-narrative inquiries, and hence these questions ultimately devolve into little obsessive monological exercises revolving around questioning the very possibility of dialogical

communication in fiction in the first place, etc., *ad infinitum*. Writing, through this action, hits a solipsistic impasse. The writer of “Octet” is painfully self-aware of the fictionality of his fiction, and no matter how “honest” or “sincere” he attempts to be, how selfless in his creation of an enjoyable aesthetic artifact, there is still perhaps something brutal, base, and manipulative in the act of writing.⁵⁴⁷ By the end, the text having been denuded of any “prearranged meaning,”⁵⁴⁸ the writer threatens to become “just another manipulative pseudopomo bullshit artist who’s trying to salvage a fiasco by dropping back to a meta-dimension and commenting upon the fiasco itself,”⁵⁴⁹ and ultimately effectively gives up even trying, telling the reader, “so decide,”⁵⁵⁰ in the final line.

The danger of the text resides not in literature’s possibilities for destruction, in either the material dissolution of the text nor in some sort of “lessening” of the reading subject, but rather that there is a sort of vicious and infinitely recursive loop within the very project of contemporary US metafiction. This results in text dangerously *accumulating*, sentences like the one above that, though they may only contain a single thought, perform this thought to such absurdly dizzying lengths that it is quite literally lost in the vicious loop of accumulation it creates. The danger of literature, for Wallace, is that metafictional recursivity has the potential to result in a kind of apocalyptically-solipsistic fugue-state, a wholly self-absorbed text which threatens to absorb the co-creator of that text as well, ultimately threatening the possibility of any subjectivity when confronted with a text. Nowhere is this formally recursive loop, this infinite possibility for the dangerous accumulation of text more evident than in Wallace’s early novella, “Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way.”

“Westward” quite unabashedly takes John Barth’s 1967 story, “Lost in the Funhouse,” as a model, reference, and polemical object. Less a story than a open-response letter at times,

“Westward,” rather than answering Barth’s question, “For whom is the funhouse fun?”⁵⁵¹ asks a different question. Drew-Lynn Eberhardt, or D.L.—self-proclaimed “postmodernist” and student of Dr. Ambrose (who is clearly meant to be Barth himself), and newly and accidentally expectant wife of Mark Nechtr⁵⁵² (the protagonist)—early in the novella scrawled the following limerick on the chalkboard of an MFA creative writing classroom before Ambrose arrived to conduct class:

For lovers, the Funhouse is fun.

For phonies, the Funhouse is love.

But *for whom*, the proles grouse,

Is the Funhouse a house?

Who lives there, when push comes to shove?⁵⁵³

D.L. is clearly meant to be read parodically within the space of the novella, oftentimes functioning as Wallace’s own superego, sublimating his fears about the act of composing “postmodern” writing. So when she writes the above “critique” of Ambrose’s (Barth’s) story “Lost in the Funhouse,”⁵⁵⁴ Wallace is simultaneously writing a critique of “Funhouse” (as well as “Westward” itself), while acknowledging that critique as fundamentally shallow, a result of a theoretical “fad,” and yet somehow no less serious in terms of its central question: “for whom is the Funhouse a house?” In other words, who lives there, who are we asking to inhabit this metafictional terrain? This question is of immense importance for Wallace, for asking who the text (the Funhouse) is not merely for, but *built* for, acknowledges that indeed *no one* may be able to feel comfortable within such a space, that it cannot actually function as a *home* at all, and the text only serves to continually upset its reader, to be an object whose goal is the production of

the uncanny and a sense of homelessness (or *unheimlich*). Consequently, as something built it always already threatens what it is built *for*.⁵⁵⁵

As most critics have argued, “Westward”’s project strives to overcome the dangers of solipsistic recursivity with a kind of hyper-meta-irony, an irony turned in on itself to the point of sincerity. The fact remains, however, that Wallace, like Barth, perhaps “wishes he had never entered the funhouse. But he has. Then he wishes he were dead. But he’s not. Therefore he will construct funhouses for others and be their secret operator—though he would rather be among the lovers for whom funhouses are designed.”⁵⁵⁶ The question that drives “Westward”—for whom is the Funhouse a *house*, who can actually dwell in the story itself?—forces us to reconsider the commonplace approach to Wallace’s relationship with irony. For it is crucial to understand that Wallace was aware of the hopelessness of “transcending” irony, of going somehow beyond Barth and other postmodern ironists—that his “prediction” or desire for a new sincerity was nothing more than a kind of hopeful non-transgressible limit imposed by the very historicity of irony itself. The *house* is built, if there is no one to inhabit it, unlivable as the postmodern condition might make it, there is no way to further critique it without participating in the very mode it suggests—i.e., taking it apart and putting it back together again in a different form. Perhaps more clearly than any US writer of his generation, Wallace understood that textual *accumulation* in all forms—commentary, influence, theoretical complexity, critical engagement, reading itself—was a danger, a *threat*, through the continual ironic treatment of there not only being no world “outside the text,” but any world *in* the text, any house where we could live in the text itself.

Paul de Man’s essay “The Rhetoric of Temporality” (1969) is especially important for Wallace’s conception and construction of irony, not least because it affords us an insight into

Wallace's own understanding and mobilization of de Manian deconstruction within his own work.⁵⁵⁷ For de Man, when discussing irony, one is faced immediately with the problem of defining the term, for "in the case of irony, one cannot so easily take refuge in the need for a historical de-mystification of the term. . . . [O]ne has to start out from the structure of the trope itself, taking one's cue from the texts that are de-mystified and, to a large extent, themselves ironical."⁵⁵⁸ In "Westward" Wallace saw the problem with irony and his own relationship to the development of literary irony in historical terms, and with the full awareness of how the very way he was approaching irony depended upon that history. Even though he is only perhaps tangentially engaging US imperialism within the text of "Westward," its title forces us to pause in terms of the *directionality* of the novella's structure and its relationship to postmodern literature. Quite clearly he is suggesting that there is a deep and conflicted relationship between, say, Barth's project, and the "project" of Empire.⁵⁵⁹ This relationship, to put it overly simply, is that postmodern metafiction capitulates to the homogenizing banality imposed by "the course of Empire," following this course rather than attempting to subvert it. The destructive capacity housed in literature's accumulation has itself been *absorbed* into the greater historical problem postmodern irony had strove to highlight. In other words, "[t]he target of [these texts'] irony is very often the claim to speak about humans as if they were facts of history. It is a historical fact that irony becomes increasingly conscious of itself in the course of demonstrating the impossibility of our being historical. In speaking of irony we are dealing not with the history of an error but with a problem that exists within the self."⁵⁶⁰ For Wallace, this "problem that exists within the self" becomes literature's apocalyptic site, an ahistorical space without the possibility for coherent communication with the other, a space by 1989 he increasingly saw US individuals inhabiting.

Wallace felt that postmodern irony had backfired, its intended targets merely absorbed into capitalism's dominant aesthetic regime: advertising. In D.L.'s terms, metafiction could neither house the "proles" (proletariat), "lovers," nor "phonies," for its very operation had become one of control rather than providing a space for dwelling (a kind of penalization of the space of literature). But what to replace it? Wallace does perceive one specific answer coming from the culture at large, and consequently the *direction* "Westward" takes is toward the filming of a commercial so grandiose it not only borders on the apocalyptic, but attempts to achieve *revelation* (pure and simple). Wallace re-imagines the Funhouse as a McDonald's-run night club whose grand opening will coincide with the filming of a reunion of everyone who has ever been in a McDonald's commercial. The brains behind this operation, J.D. Steelritter—quite literally Barth commercialized—imagines the results in quite lurid and apocalyptic terms:

He will watch desire build to that red-and-gold pitch, that split-second shudder and sneeze of thirty year's consumers, *succumbing*, as *one*. And this is the one secret of a public genius: it will be the Storm before the Calm. Gorged with flora and fauna their money's killed and shipped frozen to serve billions, the alumni will give in, reveling, utterly.

And that, as they say, will be that. No one will ever leave the rose farm's Reunion. The revelation of What They Want will be on them; and, in that revelation of Desire, they will Possess. They will all Pay the Price—without persuasion. It's J.D.'s swan song. No more need for J.D. Steelritter Advertising or its helmsman's genius. Life, the truth, will be its own commercial. Advertising will have finally arrived at the death that's been its object all along. And, in Death, it will of course become Life. The last commercial. Popular culture, the U.S. of A.'s great lalated lullaby, the big remind-a-pad

on the refrigerator of belief, will, forever unsponsored, tumble into carefully salted soil. The public, one great need, will not miss being reminded of what they believe. They'll doubt what they fear, believe what they wish; and, united, as Reunion, their wishes will make it so. Their wishes will, yes, come true. Fact will be fiction will be fact. Ambrose and his academic heirs will rule, without rules. *Meatfiction*.^{561, 562}

Wallace perceived that the reification of the subject in Western, and particularly in US culture, has caused subjective desire *itself* to become a manipulable object. No longer is labor, one's time, one's bodily energy, long understood as the object of capital's violence, the horizon of control, but the process of desire *itself*—in Steelritter's vision of desire being synonymous with living—becomes merely an object of capital emptied of any “real” or “true” subjective content. Consequently, Wallace forced himself to contend in “Westward” with the disturbing fact that intellectual labor and the *avant garde*—i.e. postmodern American metafiction—was not only complicit with the culture industry's reification of the subject, but through popular culture's appropriation of postmodern irony, may in fact have had a large hand in *producing* the very conditions that made this reification possible.

That the limits of irony—both in terms of advertising and in terms of contemporary fiction, in other words, between “high” and “low” culture—are apocalyptic (and indeed *revelatory*), should not surprise us. Postmodernism has accomplished the emptying of presence out of pretty much everything for Wallace. Not only had the lessons of Roland Barthes's “The Death of the Author” (1967) been learned exhaustively,⁵⁶³ but the prospect of proposing that any authenticity remained whatsoever appears somewhat comic, if not naïve. Rather than evoking the all-too familiar claims of the “death of the novel,” or the “end of literature,” Wallace's work in “Westward” then becomes, in a kind of Arnoldian-reverse, a critic working in an artists' time

(despite writing fiction, of course), someone for whom the aesthetic landscape is *too* full, too aware of itself as full, and he sees that landscape reveling in that fact to the point of destruction. This is the logic of Steelritter's McDonald's commercial to end all commercials. Consumer desire, taken to its ironic limit, achieves a kind of advertising-aesthetic-stasis; there ceases to be any lag-time between the instantiation of desire and its object-fulfillment. Any discord, any moment of doubt, will be resolved with the cultural unity afforded total solipsistic desire. Wallace's great fear might simply be that his *own* fiction is contributing to such assemblages.

With this in mind, de Man is again useful for understanding Wallace:

The moment the innocence or authenticity of our sense of being in the world is put into question, a far from harmless process gets underway. It may start as a casual bit of play with a stray loose end of the fabric, but before long the entire texture of the self is unraveled and comes apart. The whole process happens at unsettling speed. Irony possesses an inherent tendency to gain momentum and not stop until it has run its full course; from the small and apparently innocuous exposure of a small self-deception it soon reaches the dimensions of the absolute.⁵⁶⁴

"Westward" takes us in the direction of the absolute, and this absolute is a kind of total-unraveling, a subject so turned in on itself as to almost vanish entirely. By refusing to actually reach Collision, Illinois, the site of the commercial, nor to end "Westward" properly in any sense at all, but rather to begin another narrative about the problems (and real potential) for telling a narrative, Wallace simultaneously acknowledges the impossible task of forging a direction toward something else, away from the course of Empire, while holding out a (perhaps naïve) hope that perhaps *directionality itself* can be changed.

One of the ways this occurs is through a “casual bit of play.” As noted above, in “Westward” Wallace “wanted to get the Armageddon-explosion, the goal metafiction’s always been about . . . over with.”⁵⁶⁵ To do so, however, he had to account for the fact that many of the modes of getting it “over with” had already acknowledged the fact of metafiction’s eschatological thrust with a fair amount of absurdity and irony. Consequently, he presents this fact fairly early on through the character of Dr. Ambrose:

Speaking of speaking about shit: Dr. Ambrose, whom we all admire with a fierceness reserved for the charismatic, could at this point profitably engage in some wordplay around and about the similarities, phonological and etymological, between the words *scatology* and *eschatology*. Smooth allusions to Homeric horses pooping death-dealing Ithacans, Luther’s excremental vision, Swift’s incontinent Yahoos.⁵⁶⁶

Dr. Ambrose, or rather John Barth’s *possible* (though unstated) ironic observation about the similarities between the words “scatology” and “eschatology” within the space of “Westward” are revealing with regard to Wallace’s anti-eschatological project as a whole in two ways.

First, he *begins* from acknowledging that much of the veil-lifting of ironically treating the apocalypse has already been accomplished by postmodern metafiction. Significantly though, this accomplishment is posed as something Dr. Ambrose *could* do if he so chose, but has not.

Ambrose’s possible wordplay occurs to Mark Nechtr while

basically they’re just standing around, as people will, their luggage a vivid jumble at their feet, tired, with that so-near-and-yet type of tension, a sense of somewhere definite they must be at by a definite time, but no clear consensus on how to get there. Since they’re late. As Dr. Ambrose might venture to observe, they’re figuratively *unsure about where to go from here*.⁵⁶⁷

Wallace implies that his *own* relationship to eschatology is not only problematic, but slightly confused. Barth did *not* complete metafiction's "Armageddon-explosion"-type goal, though Wallace is here imagining and playing with the idea that he *could have* by ironically treating the theme of the end of the world as nothing more than the study of, or obsession with, excrement, a theme that has been digested and reproduced (or excreted) since the beginning of Western literature. The surrounding situation accompanying Mark's musing about the possibility of what Ambrose *would* say also displays this confusion. They are in the midst of traveling, having just disembarked from a plane at the Central Illinois Airport, and, being late and having missed the shuttles transporting people to Collision for the commercial, have no means of going further toward their destination. They are "unsure about where to go from here." In other words, Wallace is perfectly aware of four things: 1) postmodern metafiction as a project has not been completed even though it could reach its goals through the imaginative extrapolation of its eschatological direction; 2) literature with any pretention of being "after" postmodernism, because of that, is unsure where to go; 3) anyone attempting to "go anywhere" is in a very difficult position because they are ultimately a kind of Nietzschean late-comer; and 4) a writer standing at this terminus is *exhausted*, an exhaustion produced by being a late-comer, as well as an exhaustion with teleological constructions themselves.

Secondly, the "full course" of this casual bit of play is expressed near the end of the novella in fairly succinct terms as the teleological limit of advertising's ability to turn anxiety into desire, and ultimately the anxiety *par excellence*—one's fear of death—into a desire *for* death. It is nothing new that the end of the world as revelatory fulfillment, as a sublimation of the anxieties associated with inevitable subjective death is often presented as something to be *desired*, a goal toward which to strive. Wallace's irony transforms this apocalyptic desire into,

not merely a cultural *telos*, but the goal of advertising itself. If postmodern advertising, as he is so aware, works first and foremost through the creation of anxieties that produce consumer desire to relieve those anxieties, then the “course of Empire,” or rather, the course of capital is the production of a desire for death.

Steelritter understands how advertising functions. On the one hand, advertising has had to constantly reinvent itself, to acknowledge that its strategies for producing consumer desire through control and conditioning are only temporary solutions. Campaigns that were once effective, are now “tired image[s]. Hackneyed jingle[s]. . . . Conditioning has obsolescence built right in.”⁵⁶⁸ On the other hand, the more effective, aesthetically complex, and subtle the advertising, the more it comes to be indistinguishable from the very televisual entertainment it accompanies, and consequently the desire to actually “leave the couch” to go out and buy the advertised product becomes more difficult through sheer inertia and enjoyment of the entertaining advertisement. “Your adman’s basic challenge: how to get folks’ fannies out of chairs; how to turn millennial boredom around, get things back on track, back toward the *finish line*? How to turn stasis into movement, either flight or pursuit?”⁵⁶⁹ Steelritter’s solution to the adman’s problem cannot help but sound disturbingly familiar:

“Turn your biggest fear into your one real desire?”

“Sounds pretty damn political,” Sternberg suggests.

“Except what’s everybody’s biggest fear?”

“The Mormon researcher had whole lists of them.”

“*Pop*.”⁵⁷⁰

“No no *no*,” J.D. shakes his head impatiently, gesturing with a cigar he does not hold. “The one *big* on. The one *everybody* has. The one that binds us up, as a crowd.”

“Death?”

“Dishonor?”

“I’d go with death, darling.”

[. . .]

“You *gesture*,” J.D. says. “You sell out the squeak of your own head’s blood. You sell out, but for selling-out’s *own* sake, without end or object . . . change the tired channel from life, honor, out of nothing but a *desire* to love what you fear: the whole huge historical Judeo-Christian campaign starts to spin in reverse, from inside.”⁵⁷¹

Steelritter hopes to turn scatology into eschatology, to leverage the ultimate form of cultural detritus, waste, and excrement—advertising—into a form that produces a desire for death, a love of death. For if the “huge historical Judeo-Christian campaign”’s goal is love of the neighbor, of the other, a desire for death is total solipsistic love, a love of that which is in the individual more-than-herself, something *no one* can ever access or confront but the self: death. (And it should be clear here that this solipsistic desire is in-and-of-itself impossible, for neither can the subject access her death—i.e., death cannot be *experienced*.⁵⁷²) In this fashion, the historical formation of apocalyptic fear and desire, though clearly always an allegory for subjective death, is transformed, even if only slightly. If metafiction’s goal has always been an “Armageddon-explosion,” it is important to understand that for Wallace this goal is ultimately not *external*, not an eschatology of the *world*, but of the subject. What is so *threatening* and *dangerous* about this desire for death is that it is produced by and within the apparatus of postmodernism *par excellence* (the “~~text itself~~”), and the ultimate object of this threat is the solipsistically absorbed individual confronting that text (whether it be advertising or metafiction). Furthermore, Wallace acknowledges that this desire for death, for the ultimate end, is produced by a system *without* a

goal, without a *telos*. Capitalism does not have any aim except to endlessly reproduce itself, to create more capital, in this case through advertising. Wallace's conceives the postmodern condition through the lens of capital doing this through mobilizing narrative's most basic feature: that it ends, that it is inherently eschatological. For any lines of flight to be available from this dominating logic, literary fiction, if it in any way hopes to go forward and present alternative possibilities, needs to divest itself of just such apocalypticism.

In these two ways—postmodernism's self-awareness of always already treating the apocalypse ironically and its complicity with the culture industry's destruction of subjectivity by producing a desire for death, for the subject's reification produced *by* and *within* that subject—Wallace's project in "Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way" should be understood less as him transcending irony, but rather—following Paul de Man reading Friedrich Schlegel's "irony of irony" or meta-irony—as Wallace understanding that there is no *end* to irony whatsoever. If there is one thing to draw from Barth's "literature of exhaustion," it is that it is simultaneously a literature of *accumulation*, and as such, resists eschatological closure at every point:

Our description seems to have reached a provisional conclusion. The act of irony, as we know [*sic*] understand it, reveals the existence of a temporality that is definitely not organic, in that it relates to its source only in terms of distance and difference and allows for no end, for no totality. Irony divides the flow of temporal experience into a past that is pure mystification and a future that remains harassed forever by a relapse with the inauthentic. It can know this inauthenticity but can never overcome it. It can only restate and repeat it on an increasingly conscious level, but it remains endlessly caught in the impossibility of making this knowledge applicable to the empirical world. It dissolves in

the narrowing spiral of a linguistic sign that becomes more and more remote from its meaning, and it can find no escape from this spiral.⁵⁷³

Mobilizing de Man's theory of irony and emphasizing Wallace's own familiarity with de Man suggests that we should not wholly take Wallace at his word in "E Unibus Pluram." The dominant mode of understanding Wallace's relationship to irony up until this point has been to read him as meta-ironic, or else reads his work as a valiant effort to leave irony behind in favor of something resembling a "new sincerity." "Westward"'s fictional project should instead be read as, if not as accomplishing, then at least pointing toward a relationship to irony that is anti-eschatological, that acknowledges irony's fundamental "temporality that is not organic," and that it "allows for no end, for no totality." In other words, Wallace's mode of getting metafiction's Armageddon-explosion "over with," is based on an acknowledgment that not only can there *not* be such an explosion, but that the whole aesthetic approach which privileges such an eschatology is not only problematic, but threatening. "Westward" points toward how such an aesthetic project might be conceived. This project's fruition can everywhere be seen in his major work, *Infinite Jest*, a work that not only confronts the more "real" apocalyptic limits of the world—nuclear war, environmental disaster, the catastrophe of capitalism, the tyranny of networked-being—but is everywhere engaged in proposing alternatives to the reifying dominance of apocalyptic discourse itself.

4.4 THE INVERTED NUKE IN THE GARDEN: ARCHIVAL EMERGENCE AND ANTI-ESCHATOLOGY IN *INFINITE JEST*

Only in extinction is the collector comprehended.

—Walter Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library”⁵⁷⁴

Could annihilation occur to matter, this were the thing to do it.

—Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*⁵⁷⁵

Infinite Jest clearly and complexly engages with the continuing impact nuclear weapons had upon the cultural imagination of the US after the Cold War.⁵⁷⁶ This engagement, however, like the seeming disappearance of nuclear warfare as a topic of public discussion during the 1990s—both in the corporate media and in popular representations—pervades the novel more atmospherically than it does explicitly. The eschatological limits of the novel, its various apocalyptic threats, though clearly defined, would not at first appear to be particularly *nuclear* in nature at all. Rather, they appear to turn instead toward exploring the extent to which US culture, having lost its Other with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, was turning meta-cannibalistically inward, consuming itself consuming itself, both on macro- and microscopic scales, thereby extending and complicating many of the motifs from “Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way.”

Following this, the apocalyptic threats faced by the US in the world of *Infinite Jest* take two explicit forms. The first threat is *epidemic*. A Quebecois separatist organization known as *Les Assassins de Fauteuils Rollents* (the AFR or “wheelchair assassins”) is attempting to acquire and “massively disseminate” the lethally entertaining *Infinite Jest* (V)⁵⁷⁷—a film so captivating it destroys any desire on the part of the viewer to do anything else except watch the film repeatedly—with the goal of rendering a significant portion of American adults completely catatonic, enjoying themselves to death. The second threat is *ecological*: the US has become so

overburdened with the waste its consumption produces that the government has to evacuate a significant portion of New England in order to create a gigantic toxic-waste dump.⁵⁷⁸ (Though the novel does not really extrapolate the implications of this, the logic of this action taken to its limit would quite clearly leave less and less room for actual human settlement until the entire US became a waste-disposal site.) Both of these apocalyptic scenarios involve, as N. Katherine Hayles has so perceptively noticed about the novel, a high level of formal recursivity, creating “cycles within cycles within cycles.”⁵⁷⁹

Infinite Jest (V)’s recursive operation resembles “Westward”’s projected Funhouse and commercial to end all commercials: the gap (or “lag-time”) between the instantiation of a desire and its fulfillment, as it asymptotically approaches zero, creates a vicious loop of televisual consumption, desire and the fulfillment of that desire now being joined in a kind of aesthetic singularity. Epidemically, the Entertainment analogously resembles a kind of cancerous virus. It infects the very DNA of aesthetic enjoyment, causing it to uncontrollably grow and multiply until there is nothing left for the viewer except the addictive need to repetitively engage in watching the film. Disseminated to the culture at large, *Infinite Jest (V)* would metastasize this out of control subjective emergence, making the citizenry of the US the victims of this malignant, tumorous growth, expanding outward from individual reification toward a cultural apocalypse.

In the Great Concavity, the region of evacuated New England into which toxic-waste is launched, a similar (though perhaps virtuous) recursive loop is traced in the form of “annular fusion,” a technology developed in the novel by J.O. Incandenza. Annular fusion is a process in which the toxic-waste produced by nuclear fusion⁵⁸⁰ is in turn converted into the very materials needed to produce nuclear energy in the first place. In essence, a kind of perpetual motion

machine is created, solving the country's dependence on fossil fuels for energy production. The ecologically maltreated region of the Concavity serves as the perfect material for this process—being massively toxic—because annular fusion works, according to the character Michael Pemulis, by “bombarding highly toxic particles with massive doses of stuff even more toxic than the radioactive particles. A fusion that feeds on poisons and produces relatively stable plutonium fluoride and uranium tetra-fluoride. All you turn out to need is access to mind-staggering volumes of toxic material.”⁵⁸¹ The ecological effects of annular fusion, however, are catastrophically recursive: “the only kertwang⁵⁸² in the whole process environmentally is that the resultant fusion turns out so greedily efficient that it sucks every last toxin and poison out of the surrounding ecosystem, all inhibitors to organic growth for hundreds of radial clicks in every direction,” thereby causing the landscape of the Great Concavity to go “from overgrown to [Eliotic] wasteland to overgrown several times a month. With the first week of the month being especially barren and the last week being like nothing on earth.”⁵⁸³

Curiously, critical assessments of *Infinite Jest* have relatively ignored Wallace's overt apocalypticism in the novel. This may simply be a result of the novel's staggering length (1,079 pages), the fabulous richness of Wallace's various explorations, the compelling multi-narrative structure, its encyclopedic construction, or its army of complex characters—all things which deserve rigorous critical attention. On the whole, however, most of the critical receptions of the novel have treated its apocalypticism tangentially at best. I would like to submit that at the heart of the novel, the prospective end of US culture (and potentially humanity) is the *central* driving force of its narrative.

For instance, in his short study of *Infinite Jest*, Stephen Burn ends one of his chapters briefly mentioning that the novel has apocalyptic implications, but then fails to pursue this

subject at any length: “at the end of chapter one I suggested that, despite its differences, *Infinite Jest* possessed similarities to the earlier encyclopedic narratives that are strategically poised on the brink of apocalypse. [. . .] The narratives move toward an apocalyptic collision [. . .] and the hidden calendar of the novel suggests that, as in ‘all quality eschatologies,’ a feast of the dead is imminent.”⁵⁸⁴ In his otherwise impressive study Marshall Boswell, in the first monograph devoted to Wallace’s work, hardly touches the apocalyptic themes in *Infinite Jest* at all, instead emphasizing Wallace’s engagement with French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. He reads the Entertainment as: “Wallace’s most visible emblem of his Lacanian program, for it both embodies and parodies Lacan’s ideas. For instance, the fundamental source of the Entertainment’s lethal appeal is its ability to give viewers what they think they have wanted all their lives: namely, a return to some state of maternal plentitude.”⁵⁸⁵ The cultural and global implications of *Infinite Jest* (V)’s lethality are almost completely ignored by Boswell, who instead focuses almost exclusively on the subjective implications of the film. Furthermore, his reading is based on an account of the *content* of the film, content we can never be absolutely sure of, for not only does one description of the film occur under clearly unreliable circumstances,⁵⁸⁶ but, quite literally, no one who has seen the film can return to tell us about it. Elizabeth Freudenthal’s insightful reading of subjective interiority mentions the apocalyptic nature of the novel frequently, but on the whole she has an agenda similar to Boswell: focusing on the subjectivity, or rather the *lack* of subjectivity of the characters in the novel.⁵⁸⁷ Since Wallace’s death, his work has received increased critical attention, but there has still not been any study devoted to the paramount importance of understanding the apocalyptic scope of his work.

The almost complete absence of attention devoted to the eschatological limits of *Infinite Jest*, a novel thoroughly marked on all sides by cultural, political, ecological, and aesthetic

crises, reflects a larger ahistorical trend in the emerging field of “Wallace Studies.” Both Boswell’s and Freudenthal’s approaches to *Infinite Jest* are paradigmatic of this trend, as is the dominant account of Wallace’s relationship to irony, as these critical approaches all privilege Wallace’s conflicted relationship to subjectivity above more explicitly historical or formal concerns. Boswell is particularly extreme in this sense, as he takes a historically specific account of subjectivity (Lacan’s), and universalizes it across the many diverse subject formations found throughout the novel. He fails to understand that, in a fashion, he is implicating himself in the same reification that the Entertainment produces. In privileging Lacan’s specific version of desire as based upon *lack*,⁵⁸⁸ and *Infinite Jest* (V) as a vehicle for providing a return to maternal plentitude, he takes what is a potential cultural disaster, one with broad political and historical implications in the world of the novel, and constructs the American subject as *the* site of this disaster. Not only does this imply a stable, universal subject, and participate in a certain brand of American exceptionalism, it also radically reduces the scope of Wallace’s (massive) novel. Boswell is surely correct in emphasizing that Wallace is both mobilizing and parodying Lacanian theory, but by arguing that an engagement with Lacan is *the ground* of *Infinite Jest*, he effectively reduces the novel to what Wallace was so clearly trying to avoid his entire career: a solipsistic, narcissistic, inwardly turned investigation of one’s own individual subjectivity without regard for one’s historical situatedness or the complex network of interlacing, multiple subject positions the contemporary subject inhabits. In a novel so clearly devoted at every turn to complicating commonly received notions of subjectivity, a novel so continually concerned with combating reification of all kinds, to ignore the historical markers and limits of the novel—political, technological, and cultural—as well as to ignore the novel’s *form*, is not only to bar access to whatever concerns Wallace *does* have vis-à-vis subjectivity, but it dismisses the

larger themes of cultural crisis and material disaster as nothing more than convenient fictional tropes rather than structures fundamentally grounding the novel's construction and its aesthetic project.

Written primarily between 1991 and 1993,⁵⁸⁹ *Infinite Jest*'s composition is clearly inscribed by its historical proximity to the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Set in 2009,⁵⁹⁰ the political landscape of the novel is everywhere defined by the *absence* of the USSR. The 1990s of the novel were as similarly decadent and culturally solipsistic as the historical 1990s for the US (perhaps best noted by the fact that Rush Limbaugh was President, presumably from 1997-2001⁵⁹¹). Like the need for the GOD in *The Broom of the System*, President Gentle, perceiving that the US needed an antagonist in the 2000s—something which to define itself *against*, an *Other*—campaigns on a platform against *waste*. His “Clean US Party” effectively mobilized the very lack of an external political threat by defining an internal threat. The ideological other of *Infinite Jest* is the very detritus expelled from the self: garbage and waste. US foreign policy throughout the novel consequently can be read as *against abjection*. Gentle is not only running on a platform to make America so clean one could quite literally eat off its soil, but, by absorbing its proximate others—Mexico and Canada—into an Organization of North American Nations (ONAN), the US could then excrete its waste, its other, into a site both geographically and politically “outside” of itself, the Great Concavity. In its simplest formation, Gentle has transformed Julia Kristeva's insight into what constitutes the abject— “[t]he abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to *P*,”⁵⁹²—into an explicit ideology and policy. This policy is cleverly and concisely summed up in Wallace's neologism: experialism. Rather than absorbing and transforming the other through imperialist foreign policy

and the grand narrative of Manifest Destiny, Gentle's program is, quite simply, to get rid of the exorbitant, excessive "not 'I,'" the abject: to "gift" portions of the US to an other (Canada).⁵⁹³

The significance of this historico-political projection of US foreign policy goes beyond simply its massive impact upon the narrative. Yes, this central act of imperialism lies at the heart of the narrative's construction, motivating the AFR to attempt the massive dissemination of *Infinite Jest* (V). It is also of immense structural importance. Each and every character in the novel and virtually every plot point revolve around and are imbricated in the consequences of US foreign policy. More structurally important, however, is how the fundamental form of the novel is produced by an *absence*. In a very real sense, *Infinite Jest* is a direct aesthetic response to the (perceived) disappearance of the discourse of Mutually Assured Destruction. The presence of the Soviet Union and the threat of global nuclear war, when taken away, Wallace understands as *also eschatological*. Without the dominant narrative of the 20th century, new narratives would necessarily be invented, new threats, antagonisms, crises, and disasters.⁵⁹⁴ Wallace's insight throughout *Infinite Jest* is that, even if MAD is absent, this absence, the absence of nuclear war, still fundamentally structures postmodern eschatological narratives *as nuclear*. Consequently, even though the apocalyptic limits of the text perhaps appear at first only tangentially nuclear, Wallace is everywhere structuring his epidemical and ecological eschatologies along nuclear lines with clear nuclear underpinnings. In this sense, not only is he anticipating eschatological constructions of all kinds during the 1990s and 2000s, where the nuclear bomb is still a dominant trope—the instantaneous apocalyptic event created by humans (or something else)—he is also visibly reconceiving and repurposing the nuclear imagination in the face of the bomb's absence. There are two principal modes of how he does this. The first is through a clear nod to Derrida's "Force and Signification" (1963), the second is through an unresolvable nuclear *ambiguity*.

As I have attempted to stress repeatedly, Wallace's familiarity with poststructuralism must be taken into account with regard to any reading of his work, but perhaps this is nowhere more the case than with *Infinite Jest*. Especially considering questions regarding structure and absence, it is difficult to understand some of the things the novel is engaged with without recalling Derrida's famous critique of structuralism and considering how Wallace might be using, inverting, or recursively doubling this critique back onto Derrida himself in his own work. Describing what he calls "structural consciousness," Derrida writes:

[T]he relief and design of structures appears more clearly when content, which is the living energy of meaning, is neutralized. Somewhat like the architecture of an uninhabited or deserted city, reduced to its skeleton by some catastrophe of nature or art. A city no longer inhabited, not simply left behind, but haunted by meaning and culture. This state of being haunted, which keeps the city from returning to nature, is perhaps the general mode of the presence or absence of the thing itself in pure language. The pure language would be housed in pure literature, the object of pure literary criticism. Thus it is in no way paradoxical that the structuralist consciousness is a catastrophic consciousness, simultaneously destroyed and destructive, *destructuring*, as is all consciousness, or at least the moment of decadence, which is the period proper to all movement of consciousness. Structure is perceived through the incidence of menace, at the moment when imminent danger concentrates our vision on the keystone of an institution, the stone which encapsulates both the possibility and the fragility of its existence. Structure can then be *methodically* threatened in order to be comprehended more clearly and to reveal not only its supports but also that secret place in which it is neither construction nor ruin but lability. . . . It is during the epochs of historical

dislocation, when we are expelled from the *site*, that this structuralist passion, which is simultaneously a frenzy of experimentation and a proliferation of schematizations, develops for itself.⁵⁹⁵

I would like to suggest that Wallace's reading of Derrida in *Infinite Jest*, attempts to develop and explore and critique what might be called a "poststructuralist consciousness."

Infinite Jest begins from a moment where content is neutralized. In the opening pages of the novel, Hal Incandenza, the novel's "protagonist"⁵⁹⁶ in its first half, is being interviewed for a tennis scholarship at the University of Arizona. Not only is this section significant because it is chronologically the *last* scene in the novel, its *end*, but it is one of the few moments we can clearly perceive anything that might be labeled "consciousness" with regard to Hal.⁵⁹⁷

Throughout *Infinite Jest* Hal is constructed as subjectively absent, lacking some basic internal self that would make him anything besides a reified production of the world he inhabits:

Hal himself hasn't had a bona fide intensity-of-interior-life-type emotion since he was tiny; he finds terms like *joie* and *value* to be so many variables in rarified equations, and he can manipulate them well enough to satisfy everyone but himself that he's in there, inside his own hull, as a human being—but in fact he's more robotic than John Wayne. One of the troubles with his Moms is the fact that Avril Incandenza believes she knows him inside and out as a human being, and an internally worthy one at that, when in fact inside Hal there's pretty much nothing at all, he knows.⁵⁹⁸

In this opening scene, however, Hal firmly declares that there is in fact a "self" in his body:

"I have an intricate history. Experiences and feelings. I'm complex.

"I read," I say, "I study and read. I bet I've read everything you've read. Don't think I haven't. I consume libraries. I wear out spines and ROM-drives. I do things like

get in a taxi and say, 'The library, and step on it.' My instincts concerning syntax and mechanics are better than your own, I can tell, with due respect.

"But it transcends mechanics. I'm not a machine. I feel and believe. I have opinions. Some of them are interesting. I could, if you'd let me, talk and talk. Let's talk about something. Let's talk about anything. I believe the influence of Kierkegaard on Camus is underestimated. I believe Dennis Gabor might very well have been the Antichrist. I believe Hobbes is just Rousseau in a dark mirror. I believe, with Hegel, that transcendence is absorption. I could interface you guys right under the table," I say, "I'm not just a creātus, manufactured, conditioned, bred for a function."

[. . .]

"I am not what you see and hear."

[. . .]

"I am not," I say.⁵⁹⁹

In a moment of "content neutralization," however, Hal's interlocutors at this moment only hear "[s]ubanimalistic noises and sounds,"⁶⁰⁰ accompanied by disturbing epileptic flailing, unreadable gestures, guttural moans, *non-signification*. Hal, though stressing he is *saying* something, and that his utterance is defined by a precocious and exhaustive practice of reading, not only is *not* being heard, the very act of attempting to communicate internal content is being viewed externally as the complete lack of meaningful content paired with a convulsive, *sick* body. The ambulance is called and Hal is committed.

From the very first pages of *Infinite Jest* Hal's consciousness (if that is even the correct word to use) might be called, in a sense, *poststructural*. It is not clear how Hal developed this condition. Throughout the rest of the body of the novel, Hal's major conflict is his own

subjectivity—i.e., whether he even *has* any or not, whether or not he is merely a product of his surroundings, an affective machine. Wallace, to his great credit, does not provide us with the events that would mark the transition between “reified Hal” or “Hal without content,” and the Hal in the beginning/end of the novel expressing fervently an internal self, even if only externally perceptible as a complete *lack* of communicative internal content. In this narrative gap occurs the progression from “content . . . neutralized” (structuralism) to content *overfull* with meaning despite its neutralization (poststructuralism). *Infinite Jest* can and should be read as Hal’s writing, as his answer to a “tired Cuban orderly” who asks “[s]o yo then man what’s your story,”⁶⁰¹ but this initial chapter is the only one written in the first person. In terms of a poststructural consciousness, what the other characters in the novel perceive about Hal in the first person is an “uninhabited structure.” And, if they encountered Hal at any moment prior to his breakdown in the Arizona admissions office, they would be correct. Until this moment in the novel (again, coming at the beginning/ending), it is difficult to call Hal’s consciousness anything but a structural consciousness. He is a complete construct, both within the world of the novel as well as merely serving as a formal point—a character—around which the novel can produce itself. “Thus it is in no way paradoxical that the structuralist consciousness is a catastrophic consciousness, simultaneously destroyed and destructive, *destructuring*, as is all consciousness.” The destruction everywhere evident in the novel is there because Hal *wrote* it. It is not only a document of his consciousness, his structural consciousness, but the very uninhabited city which defines such a consciousness. *Infinite Jest* is his document, formed along the lines of his neutral content, everywhere breaking down, but it is ultimately *labile*. The first person of the opening/ending scene is the result of some change. (We cannot know what this change is.⁶⁰²) *Infinite Jest* is a novel of “historical dislocation” in many senses of the term, but the major

dislocation occurs in the first person at the beginning/ending. We have *no idea*, no access to how or why Hal becomes a subject, a first person narrator who is “in there,” and consequently, Wallace is very much asking us to read this transition—this lability from haunted city, from overly-schematized narrative form, from pure, precise, exhausting grammatology, to language we cannot hear/understand, to narrative unsatisfactorily beginning/ending, to city (body) *unhaunted*, too full—as his engagement with Derrida. *Infinite Jest* is a “frenzy of experimentation and a proliferation of schematization,”⁶⁰³ assuredly, but it is so *always already* with Derrida’s deconstruction of such frenzies and proliferations in mind. If Hal *becomes* a subject, and one incapable of addressing any other, it is through the very act of writing what comes before this moment of subject formation. To become a subject, to narrate the first chapter in the first person, requires the entire textual object behind it to understand how an “I” is even possible. That this “I” cannot be understood, that this “I” defines itself along the lines of what it has read, as text, as access to text, this should not surprise us in the least. It is not what we “see and hear,” it is what is *absent*—the transition from structuralism to poststructuralism—that defines Hal’s textual consciousness.

Perhaps an even more acute absence than this transition, however, is the absence of any ending whatsoever in the novel. The opening chapter, being a clear sort of “beginning,” produces the effect of almost completely evading narrative closure. This absence, consequently, forces us to think of the very *form* of the novel in Derrida’s terms as well:

Only *pure absence*—not the absence of this or that, but the absence of everything in which all presence is announced—can *inspire*, in other words, can *work*, and then make one work. The pure book naturally turns toward the eastern edge of this absence which, beyond or within the prodigiousness of all wealth, is its first and proper content. The pure

book, the book itself, by virtue of what is most irreplaceable within it, must be the “book about nothing” that Flaubert dreamed of—a gray, negative dream, the origin of the total Book that haunted other imaginations. This emptiness as the situation of literature must be acknowledged by the critic as that which constitutes the specificity of his object, as that *around which* he always speaks. Or rather, his proper object—since nothing is not an object—is the way in which this nothing *itself* is determined by disappearing.⁶⁰⁴

The “pure absence” at the “center” of *Infinite Jest* is the Entertainment. As opposed to Boswell’s reading of *Infinite Jest* (V), which is based (more-or-less) upon the content of the film, the novel *neutralizes* whatever this content might be. The Entertainment defines an absence. It is purely absent. We do not see it. It can only be talked about and written about, recounted by a narrator from other written forms. For example, Molly Notkin’s account of the “content” of the film not only occurs under the clearly unreliable circumstances of filmic cliché, but is clearly delivered by someone highly schooled in film studies themselves:

Technical interviewers under Chief of Unspecified Services R. (‘the G.’) Tine really do do this, bring a portable high-watt lamp and plug it in and adjust its neck so the light shines down directly on the interview’s subject, whose homburg and shade-affording eyebrows had been removed by polite request. And it was this, the harsh light on her fully exposed post-Marxist face, more than any kind of tough *noir*-informed grilling from R. Tine Jr. and the other technical interviewer, that prompted M.I.T. A.B.D.-Ph.D. Molly Notkin [Massachusetts Institute of Technology All But Done-Doctor of Philosophy], fresh off the N.N.Y.C. [New New York City] high-speed rail, seated in the Sidney Peterson-shaped directorial chair amid dropped luggage in her co-op’s darkened and

lock-dickied living room, to spill her guts, roll over and eat cheese, sing like a canary, and tell everything she believed she knew [. . .] (and then some).⁶⁰⁵

Whatever the content of *Infinite Jest* (V) might be, here, as everywhere else in the entire novel, it is so mediated by layers of textuality as to disappear entirely. First, whatever Molly said during this interrogation clearly cannot be wholly known, for it depends upon an intimate familiarity with what, one would assume, is a highly confidential transcript of her account of the film. The “text” of the Entertainment is being interpreted by Notkin, and is then interpreted by a narrator, assuming it is Hal, who could in no way know what she said. Second, the very conditions of formal interrogation by a semi-clandestine intelligence arm of the US government⁶⁰⁶ put into doubt whatever it is she says. She so “clearly” wishes to satisfy her interrogators that to take her account at face value would be to ignore the well documented unreliability of interrogation. Third, the very structure of the interrogation is so clearly textual, obviously marked by Wallace’s mobilization of *noir* film clichés: the lights, “spill her guts, roll over and eat cheese, sing like a canary,” etc. Exacerbating the filmic nature of how the interrogation is presented Molly herself is someone (overly-)familiar with the conventions of filmic analysis, since she is an “M.I.T. A.B.D.-Ph.D.,” this not only metacritically gestures toward the very type of analysis here being undertaken,⁶⁰⁷ parodying academia, critical theory, film studies, etc., but implies that Molly’s account of the film is highly mediated by her familiarity with the genre she is inhabiting, the filmic conditions of the interrogation, and the irony of such filmic interrogation *about a film*. The Entertainment is not only absent here, mediated, constructed, generic, and metacritical, but calling upon the critic to understand “this emptiness as the situation of literature must be acknowledged by the critic as that which constitutes the specificity of his object, as that *around*

which he always speaks. Or rather, his proper object—since nothing is not an object—is the way in which this nothing *itself* is determined by disappearing.”

As said above, if *Infinite Jest* (V) is clearly Wallace’s epidemically apocalyptic object around which the narrative is constructed, an object whose fate is clearly unknown and ambiguous,⁶⁰⁸ then its *absence* must be taken very seriously, and it is a kind of pure absence in the novel, an absence that makes *work*, but it is also “The pure book, the book itself, by virtue of what is most irreplaceable within it, must be the ‘book about nothing’ that Flaubert dreamed of—a gray, negative dream, the origin of the total Book that haunted other imaginations.” The Entertainment is this negative dream, absorbing anyone who encounters it into its text, and it can only be “about nothing.” Joelle, more familiar with Incandenza’s work, emphasizes the lack of any narrative content in his other films when thinking about the Entertainment:

The man’s Work was amateurish, she’d seen. . . . Was *amateurish* the right word? More like the work of a brilliant optician and technician who was an amateur at any kind of real communication. Technically gorgeous, the Work, with lighting and angles planned out to the frame. But oddly hollow, empty, no sense of dramatic *towardness*—no narrative movement toward a real story; no emotional movement toward an audience.⁶⁰⁹

The *telos* of the world of *Infinite Jest* is an encounter with the Entertainment, a film that is potentially entirely formal, non-narrative, technical. Whatever is “in” it, is absent. Consequently, “if there are structures, they are possible only on the basis of the fundamental structure which permits totality to open and overflow itself such that it *takes on meaning* by anticipating a *telos* which here must be understood it is most indeterminate form.”⁶¹⁰ *Infinite Jest* (V) is teleological through and through, it defines the novel’s end, but this end is never given. Being of “indeterminate form,” whatever meaning the film gives us overflows, determines, and creates the

text through this absence. It is the force that causes the imaginative irruption that is the novel. Recalling Derrida's formulation of the textuality of nuclear warfare, how it can only be talked and written about, how it does not "exist" in any real sense of the term, Wallace is constructing the Entertainment in precisely the same fashion. It cannot be experienced, it can only be talked and written about, but any representation of it only exacerbates its textuality. Wallace ingeniously takes the "object" which produced the dominant apocalyptic rhetoric of the twentieth century—the nuclear bomb—and transforms it into something *wholly* textual that everywhere determines the eschatological limits of the novel.

The nuclear bomb as an actual, physical, *present* force in the novel, however, remains a narrative *possibility* (though still perhaps limited to the wholly textual). In yet another moment of highly mediated textual layering, Wallace gives the "history" of the novel's political events in filmic form. Mario Incandenza, the middle-brother in the Incandenza family, an ambiguously damaged, stunted individual who is nonetheless capable of immense empathy (one of the few characters who is), is this untitled film's *auteur*. Based upon "*The ONANtiad*, a four-hour piece of tendentiously anticonfluent political parody long since dismissed as minor Incandenza by his late father's archivists, Mario's piece isn't really better than his father's; it's just different (plus of course way shorter)."⁶¹¹ Every Interdependence Day—the day commemorating the establishment of ONAN—the film is screened for everyone at the Enfield Tennis Academy (ETA). Mario's film is a mixture of a puppet show, depicting President Gentle and other members of his staff, and "his late father's parodic device of mixing real and fake news-summary cartridges, magazines, articles, and historical headers from the last few great daily papers, all for a sort of time-lapse exposition of certain developments leading up to Interdependence and Subsidized Time and cartographic Reconfiguration and the renewal of a

tight and considerably tidier Experialist U.S. of A., under Gentle.”⁶¹² Though there are many clever moments of political parody in Mario’s film, and more than one reference to the effect the persistent presence of nuclear weapons had upon US foreign policy in the novel,⁶¹³ one moment stands above all others in terms of actually physically present nuclear weaponry:

President Gentle has isolated himself in a small private suite at Bethesda Naval Hospital with several thousand dollars’ worth of sound and sterilization equipment and is spending all day every day singing morose show-tunes in inappropriate keys to the U.S.M.C Colonel who stands near the Dermalatix Hypospectral sterilization appliance handcuffed to the Black Box of United States nuclear codes. Unspecified Services Office spokespersons have declined to comment on reports of such erratic Executive directives as: [. . .] instructing silo personnel at all S.A.C. installations north of 44° to remove their missiles from the silos and reinsert them upside down.⁶¹⁴

As so many other moments in the text remain ultimately ambiguous, the most explicitly *nuclear* moment, this moment where nuclear weapons are presented as potentially inverted in their silos, that they were perhaps launched (downward), and that this action is what, in effect, created the highly toxic conditions in the Great Concavity—whatever the facts are in the novel, they cannot be known, they are absent.⁶¹⁵

The facts of detonation are unimportant for, more importantly, Wallace is quite literally *inverting the nuclear trope*. He is deliberately, and almost mockingly declaring that not only is the nuclear imagination “over,” but we need desperately to aesthetically invert it. At a fundamental level Wallace understood that the apocalypse has *always* been literary, that the nuclear bomb made this textuality explicitly and vitally material, and that we need to now focus

on what the nuclear bombs were *pointed at*. If the target of apocalyptic technology is the text, then it is also clearly *code*. But it is not only this.

The bombs are pointed at the origins of the Anglo-Saxon inhabitation of North America. The bombs create a “concavity” that is spatial, metaphorical, geographical, and national (i.e., a piece either added to the cartographical US or subtracted from Canada). The bombs, in pointing at text, are pointing at *landscape*, at “the real,” and they are *textual bombs*, they are targeting the very ground of textuality itself. Wallace’s most obvious nod to postmodernism emerges through a textually absent inverted nuclear explosion that creates a physical hole in the country in order to dispose of its waste. There is a no more damning critique of the rhetorical extremes made possible by certain strands of the nuclear imagination, but this is also simultaneously a celebration of how vital that imagination has been. We cannot help but to think that the American pastoral—i.e. the machine in the garden—becomes the machine turned upside down and used against the garden. But the machine is no normal machine, it is a force, a dynamo. The very material of the world boiled down into the smallest particle we can destroy—geographically and otherwise, this ability is purposely turned against the “original” machine in the garden *itself*. May it not be appropriate to declare that “the inverted nuke in the garden” here is also an *inverted machine in the machine*? And the machine that Wallace is pointing to is, recursively, text itself.

In one of the most compelling scenes in the novel, this inversion—the textual nuclear weapon pointed at a textual object and at representation (itself)—is made explicit during the Eschaton game young members of ETA play. Eschaton is a war game in the classically nuclear sense, simulating and then developing the conditions that would lead up to global nuclear war, and then further simulating how exactly such a conflict would transpire. It is a *fabulously*

complex game, with a dense rulebook, which “is about as long and interesting as J. Bunyan’s stupefying *Pilgrim’s Progress* [. . .], and a pretty tough nut to compress into anything lively (although every year a dozen more E.T.A. kids memorize the thing at such a fanatical depth that they sometimes report reciting mumbled passages under light dental or cosmetic anesthesia, years later).”⁶¹⁶ The game is played on a “map” of four contiguous tennis courts representing the globe, and uses old tennis gear to represent various strategic targets. Nukes are “launched” by lobbing tennis balls at certain targets. How closely they hit their targets is entered into a complex mathematical rubric to assess damage to the area. “A given Eschaton’s winning team is simply that Combatant with the most favorable ratio of points for INDDIR—Infliction of Death, Destruction, and Incapacitation of Response—to SUFDDIR—self-evident.”⁶¹⁷

The narrator of *Infinite Jest* explains some of the attraction of the game for its participants as follows:

Every year at E.T.A., maybe a dozen of the kids between maybe like twelve and fifteen—children in the very earliest stages of puberty and really abstract-capable thought, when one’s allergy to the confining realities of the present is just starting to emerge as a weird kind of nostalgia for stuff you never even knew—maybe a dozen of these kids, mostly male, get fanatically devoted to a homemade Academy game called Eschaton. Eschaton is the most complicated children’s game anybody around E.T.A.’d ever heard of. [. . .] Its elegant complexity, combined with a dismissive-reenactment frisson and a complete disassociation from the realities of the present, composes most of its puerile appeal. Plus it’s almost addictively compelling, and shocks the tall.⁶¹⁸

Within the projected future of *Infinite Jest*, Eschaton evokes “a weird kind of nostalgia for stuff you never even knew.” The game’s participants, mostly children just on the verge of puberty,

would have been born in the late 1990s. The “stuff” they never knew is precisely the threat of global nuclear war. They have a *nostalgia* for such a conflict, for a world marked both politically and historically by such a grand narrative. The confining realities of the present, the conglomeration of the US, Mexico, and Canada into ONAN, the lack of any clear transnational political conflicts, the lack of a national narrative—all these things conspire to evoke a nostalgia in the pre-pubescent youngsters for a world where a narrative eschaton was clear: the possibility of total annihilation. It must be stressed, however, that the “stuff” these kids never knew, their nostalgia, is also a fantasy. In an endnote to the “stuff they never knew,” Wallace writes: “the basic phenomenon being what more abstraction-capable post-Hegelian adults call ‘Historical Consciousness.’”⁶¹⁹ This “historical consciousness,” however, is a nostalgia for *something that never happened*. The political scenario of the game is a scenario that not only never occurred, but is completely fictional with regard to the political realities of the Cold War. (Here we cannot but help to hear Derrida’s claim that nuclear war is a fabulously textual phenomenon in that it has never occurred, that we can only talk and write about it.) The fictional combatants involved are all conglomerations of transnational interests, and are given acronyms signifying these conglomerations: AMNAT (American Nations and the North American Treaty Organization), SOVWAR (Soviet Union / Warsaw Pact), REDCHI (Red China), LIBSYR or IRLIBSYR (Libya and Syria, or Iran [or possibly Iraq], Libya and Syria), SOUTHAF (South Africa) and INDBAK (India and Pakistan).⁶²⁰ With these acronyms Eschaton effectively blurs its relationship to concrete political realities, thereby making it possible to run the simulation over and over again, as each of these markers of signification only roughly represent either the past, present, or future. The simulation constructs a narrative that is completely fictional. AMNAT is *not* ONAN here nor is SOVWAR Russia. The game effectively attempts to extend the narrative of the Cold War

around its central conflict (nuclear war), extending an essentially American narrative without the “corrupting influence” of Canada and Mexico, while still acknowledging that influence tangentially—i.e., it is AMNAT, the “nat” signifying nations or else NATO (Canada and Mexico are presumably included, but not in the contemporary ONANite configuration). These children’s nostalgia is for the nuclear trope itself. Even though the threat of global nuclear war is off the table in *Infinite Jest*, its absence is seen in the light of the “confining realities of the present,” and being on the verge of adulthood, becoming capable of abstract thought, they need and desire that this nuclear trope to persist.⁶²¹ In terms of the persistence of the nuclear trope, in Eschaton it is wholly textual, something both structuring, affecting, and defining the limits of *Infinite Jest* as a whole. As this specific game of Eschaton is played out, the novel emphasizes this textuality in roughly three ways.

The first way the textuality of the nuclear is emphasized is simply how textual the game is itself. Eschaton requires high level mathematics not only to begin, but to decide who is the victor of the apocalypse. At the beginning of each game, the game master must establish who has how many nuclear warheads. This is done, according to Michael Pemulis’s reported speech, by “using the Mean-Value formula for dividing available megatonnage among Combatants whose GNP/Military // Military/Nuke ratios vary from Eschaton to Eschaton [which] keeps you from needing to crunch out a new ratio for each Combatant each time, plus lets you multi-regress the results so Combatants get rewarded for past thermonuclear largesse (occasional verbal flourishes Hal’s—HJI).”⁶²² The entirety of Eschaton depends upon various informational algorithms, upon the functioning of *code*, but also depends upon recursively using itself as text. Each Eschaton is, in a sense, merely the development of various bits of random information put into an apocalypse

algorithm. Code here reproduces itself, reproducing a simulation of disaster, which is then repeated for different simulations of disaster.

Not only does the game depend upon higher-level mathematics than twelve-to-fifteen-year-olds are usually familiar with, but these mathematics are given to us in reported speech by Hal in an endnote, further recursively layering the textuality of *Eschaton*. This is complicated even more when Pemulis, who is relating the mathematical grounding for determining initial megatonnage, says, “It’s going to be interesting to see if (*sic*) Hal, who thinks he’s just too sly trying to outline *Eschaton* in the 3rd-person tense (*sic*) like some jowly old Eschatologist with leather patches on his elbows (*sic*), if Inc can transpose (*sic?*) the math here without help from the Mumster.”⁶²³ Hal’s “(*sics*)” here not only signal the textuality of the novel, of his “authorship” of the novel, but produce further recursive textuality. Pemulis’s mathematical expertise enabled him to develop the basic mathematical formulas for not only determining initial megatonnage in the game, but also for determining the victor (i.e. the game is thoroughly inscribed from beginning to end by the functioning of code). But to represent the mathematic textuality of the game requires Hal to transcribe Pemulis’s words, and furthermore Hal “can just sit there making a steeple out of his fingers and pressing it to his lip and not take notes and wait and like inscribe (*sic*) it anytime in the next week and get it verbatim, the smug turd.”⁶²⁴ Hal’s encyclopedic textual memory—for instance he had memorized the entire *Oxford English Dictionary* before age seventeen (!)—here emerges both in his verbal flourishes and editorial emendations. Hal, quite clearly, becomes a “professor of *Eschaton*” and “some jowly old Eschatologist with leather patches on his elbows” by editing the text which makes *Eschaton* possible. Recalling Hal’s absent subjectivity from above, his role both here and elsewhere becomes almost wholly archival. He is a scholar of textual apocalypse whose role is to clarify

and interpret Pemulis's at times ambiguous or incorrect verbal formulations. To make the text of Eschaton clear in the space of the novel, in other words, requires someone thoroughly schooled in interpreting (apocalyptic) text.

Furthermore, the basis of Eschaton in mathematical code highly influences how participants play the game.

Uninitiated adults who [. . .] might naturally expect to see fuzzless green warheads getting whacked indiscriminately skyward all over the place as everybody gets blackly drunk with thanoptic fury in the crisp November air—these adults would more likely find an actual game of Eschaton strangely subdued, almost narcotized-looking. Your standard round of Eschaton moves at about the pace of chess between adepts. For these devotees become, on court, almost parodically adult—staid, sober, humane, and judicious twelve-year-old world leaders, trying their best not to let the awesome weight of their responsibilities—responsibilities to nation, globe, rationality, ideology, conscience and history, to both the living and the unborn—not to let the terrible agony they feel at the arrival of this dark day—this dark day the leaders've prayed would never come and have taken every conceivable measure rationally consistent with national strategic interests to avoid, to prevent—not to let the agonizing weight of responsibility compromise their resolve to do what they must to preserve their people's way of life. So they play, logically, cautiously, so earnest and deliberate in their calculations they appear thoroughly and queerly adult, almost Talmudic, from a distance.⁶²⁵

The cold logic of mathematical algorithms, the precise code-based grounding to each and every game, rather than producing chaotic play—"everybody get[ting] blackly drunk with thanoptic fury"—further produces a kind of "calculated apocalypse." In a novel without any discernibly

“earnest and deliberate” adult, when each “adult” character is so thoroughly damaged, neurotic, caricatured, and addicted (to something), this production of adulthood, this responsibility that is “staid, sober, humane, and judicious,” signals that such an approach to political and historical realities (i.e. one that is “adult”) is only possible in a *textual simulation played by children*. Furthermore, by children who have never known such a political and historical reality *as adults*. Opposed to Gentle’s ridiculous inversion of nuclear missiles in their silos, a “responsible” approach to nuclear warfare is only possible within the confines of the deep textuality the participants of Eschaton are engaged in.

This sobriety of play, however, breaks down and highlights the second mode in which the nuclear bomb is thoroughly textual. During this specific game of Eschaton Hal and his friends sit on bleachers, smoking marijuana, and observing the developments in the game. For a few pages Wallace gives us a fairly fascinating description of how the game progresses, despite the fact that “Eschaton’s tough to enliven, verbally, even for the [chemically] stimulated. Being generally too slow and cerebral.”⁶²⁶ Various combatants are taking turns making strategic nuclear strikes, “artfully avoid[ing] the escalation to SACPOP [Sacrifice of Population⁶²⁷] that often takes both super-Combatants [AMNAT and SOVWAR] right out of the game.”⁶²⁸ During the cessation of hostilities between AMNAT and SOVWAR—during which Otis P. Lord, the game’s appropriately named omniscient game-master or “God,” is busy and distracted by attempting to convey information between the two super-powers—

REDCHI, itself quickly trying to rack up some unanswered INDDIR, sends a towering topspin lob into INDDIR’s quadrant, scoring what REDCHI claims is a direct hit on Karachi, and what warheadless INDDIR claims is only an indirect hit on Karachi. It’s an uneasy moment: a dispute such as this would never occur in the real God’s real world,

since the truth would be manifest in the actual size of the actual wienie roast in the actual Karachi.⁶²⁹

Lord attempts to adjudicate the dispute between REDCHI and INDBAK by appealing to Pemulis. Further complicating the lines between the real and the virtual, between the actual and the simulated,

Pemulis gravely shakes his white-hatted head, pointing out that Lord is God and either sees or doesn't, in Eschaton, [when] Lord has an intense little crying fit that's made abruptly worse now J.J. Penn of INDBAK all of a sudden gets the idea to start claiming that now that it's snowing [in the space of the novel's "real" world] the snow totally affects the blast area and fire area and pulse-intensity and maybe also has fallout implications, and he says Lord has to now completely redo everybody's damage parameters before anybody can form realistic strategies from here on out.⁶³⁰

Pemulis responds that "It's snowing on the goddamn *map*, not the *territory*, you *dick!*" for he is "sensitive to any theater-boundary-puncturing threats to the map's integrity—threats that've come up before, and that as Pemulis sees it threaten the game's whole sense of animating realism (which realism depends on buying the artifice that 1300 m.² of composition tennis court representing the whole rectangular projection of the planet earth)."⁶³¹

The basic crisis in the Eschaton game, this moment of procedural dispute, occurs when the simulation is threatened by the real, and furthermore, when the "real(ism)" of the game is threatened by the real of the physical world. This is Pemulis's point. For the integrity of the game to be maintained depends upon it remaining wholly within the realm of the simulated, of the referential. Eschaton is a model of the real. For its realism to be maintained, the map on which it is played must remain a mere representation of the underlying algorithmic code on

which the simulation's outcome depends—it must remain completely simulated. But Pemulis, though correct at a structural level, ignores a more basic fact. The “real” world, with its physical laws and its contingent environmental factors, cannot be dismissed when considering the “whole” of the game. Yes, a large portion of the game is being run on a Yushityu computer, taking analog data from the “real” and making it digitally meaningful, but this data is dependent upon a host of real world factors that are neither digital, algorithmic, nor code-based, real world factors that are completely outside the parameters of the simulation. The snow, in other words, though not affecting the underlying mathematical and simulated textuality of the game, cannot but help to affect the game itself: the physical trajectory of the balls, the ability for its participants to lob effectively, the differences in spin and trajectory such November cold could produce, etc.⁶³² The game, in other words, is an *assemblage* of the digital and the analog. The inseparability between the real and the simulated is clearly being presented by Wallace, but what is clear from this and the following events is that not only is Wallace metacritically questioning his own construction of nuclear war as an explicitly textual phenomenon by directly pointing to the thinking of Baudrillard regarding simulation, but that this very metacritical (or metafictional) recursive doubling of the question of nuclear textuality serves to produce *more* mediated layering of the larger text and narrative in *Infinite Jest*.

Recall Baudrillard's famous opening discussion of Jorge Luis Borges's “On Exactitude in Science” (1960)⁶³³ regarding maps and territories in *Simulacra and Simulation*:

today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept.

Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the

generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no

longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes

the territory—*precession of simulacra*—that engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map.⁶³⁴

For Baudrillard the point is clear. It is not that reality itself has become a simulation, that somehow postmodernity has become so highly mediated that there is no distinction between the real and the mimetic, but that the mimetic itself *precedes* the real, and furthermore, that it has no basis in the real—i.e., it ceases to be mimetic in any classic sense of the word. The models or the map have no *origin*, no reference point, they are simulacra: copies without an original. But these are not simulacra in the Platonic sense of the word, but rather they are simulacra that *produce* the real. Wallace's (almost overly-)explicit reference to Baudrillard here is him at his most metafictional in *Infinite Jest*.⁶³⁵ For it is at this moment that he does not let us forget that the very debate which is occurring regarding simulation and the real, regarding the map and the territory, is *occurring in a work of fiction*; and the fact that this moment revolves so heavily around *nuclear simulation* is of the utmost importance.

Wallace is not merely aping Baudrillard, referencing some fashionable cultural theory, winking at the reader, letting them in on a joke regarding representation and simulation, saying: look, the very problem of locating the real against the simulated is here occurring in a simulation within a representational aesthetic object, recursively doubling and tripling the mediation between the text and the real.⁶³⁶ If this were all he were doing, then this moment of *Infinite Jest* would simply be reiterating Baudrillard's point in what is now (perhaps) a fairly tired fashion. By making this crisis of representation occur in a *nuclear* simulation, occurring in a novel which is constantly referencing the crisis of *maps*—that the problem facing ONAN is ultimately a topographical one—i.e., whose map does the Concavity “belong” to?⁶³⁷—Wallace is pointing to

the unimpeachable textuality of the nuclear. Eschaton is a simulation of a nuclear war that not only did not happen in reality—indeed, perhaps could not happen in reality—but the basic parameters of the game are wholly fictional and simulated—i.e., it does not represent any “real” political reality that ever existed. In the world of *Infinite Jest* the nuclear threatens the *map*, the text, the simulation, and not the territory, not the real. The territory of ONAN is indeed shredding and slowly rotting, seen most clearly in Wallace’s (de)construction of the Great Concavity, and whether the nuclear produced this territory or not, the a concavity is a topographic and textual concavity. Whatever territory the concavity represents topographically, whether it belongs to Canada or the US, is unimportant, because the territory itself has more-or-less ceased to exist, it is functionally absent. As the nuclear itself becomes a simulacrum by threatening the very simulation which makes it possible (the text, the game), it consequently invades the *narrative* world of the novel. The fundamental crisis at the heart of the novel, both in its grand political narrative and in the world of ETA, its accompanying Eschaton, and Hal’s narrative, is the *crisis of nuclear textuality*. The novel is engaged in asking: what happens to the apocalyptic narrative when its primary mode, the nuclear, becomes *wholly textual*?

The resulting events produced by the map/territory debate in the game of Eschaton highlight a third moment of nuclear textuality and how these events ultimately structure the resulting narrative of the novel. The problem of real-world snow is set aside for the moment while AMNAT and SOVWAR attempt to come to terms to prevent SACPOP, meeting together in “Sierra Leone.” Hal, watching the IRLIBSYR combatant Evan Ingersoll, “can almost visualize a dark light bulb going on above [his] head”⁶³⁸ as Ingersoll realizes that the results of this summit will effectively eliminate him from the game as SOVWAR will go SACPOP against

him. In a radical, unprecedented move in the history of Eschaton, Ingersoll hits a tennis ball directly at SOVWAR's Ann Kittenplan

and then casually suggests that IRLIBSYR has just scored a direct 5-megaton contact-burst against SOVWAR's entire launch capacity [. . .] plus also AMNAT's own launch capacity, plus both Combatants' ordnance and heads of state, all lie well within the blast's kill radius—which by Ingersoll's rough calculations extends from the Ivory Coast to the doubles alley's Senegal. Unless of course that kill radius is somehow altered by the possible presence of climatic snow, he adds, beaming.⁶³⁹

At this moment, the entire ordered, careful, algorithmic apocalypse breaks down. No one in the history of Eschaton has ever launched a strike against an actual physical combatant, as they are understood as representations of transnational nuclear capability rather than the actual “heads of state.” In terms of this particular game of Eschaton, nuclear textuality invades the real world, the representational nuclear weapons (tennis balls), being launched against the “real” (Ann Kittenplan), and this action consequently constitutes a crisis of the highest order within the game, causing Lord, “with near-ceremonial care [to exchange] the white-beanie on his head for the red beanie that signifies Utter Global Crisis.”⁶⁴⁰ Pemulis, of course, continues to rail against the lack of distinction between the map and the territory: “Eschaton gentlemen is about logic and axiom and mathematical probity and discipline and verity and *order*.” In his mind, Eschaton is not even possible, axiomatically, in its “icily elegant game-theoretical form” if players can be targets—“players’ exemption from strikes goes without saying [. . .]; it’s like *preaxiomatic*.” Lord, however, consulting the rule-book, finds that there is no specific rule stating that players cannot become strategic targets if they are outside of their “defense-net.” As a result of Ingersoll’s action total chaos breaks loose, “a degenerative chaos so complex in its disorder that it’s hard to

tell whether it seems choreographed or simply chaotically disordered,”⁶⁴¹ as players completely abandon the game to hit tennis balls willy-nilly at other players, as well as physically assault one another. Injuries requiring hospitalization occur, and Lord’s head ultimately goes through the screen of the Yushityu computer.

This event comes to be known as the Eschaton debacle and constitutes the primary crisis of the ETA narrative.⁶⁴² The breakdown and the resulting fallout of this Eschaton constitutes the significant moment of change in this half of *Infinite Jest*’s narrative, or, in other words, the shift here occurs in the sense that Frank Kermode gives us to understand *peripeteia* in his work on apocalyptic narrative: “peripeteia [. . .] is a disconfirmation followed by a consonance; the interest of having our expectations falsified is obviously related to our wish to reach the discovery or recognition by an unexpected and instructive route.”⁶⁴³ After this moment, disciplinary action is taken against the older students who sat by and watched the events unfold without intervening. Pemulis is more-or-less expelled from the school. Drug-tests are required for all the “Big Brothers” sitting by. And all this throws Hal’s world into near-complete disarray, presumably resulting in the version of Hal that begins/ends the novel. Furthermore, Hal quits smoking marijuana in anticipation of the impending drug tests he will have to take—ETA students, like any athletes today, are subjected to frequent drug tests—and this forces him not only to withdraw from the drug physically and mentally, but to seek help from Narcotics Anonymous. Again, though we are not given many of the events between Hal’s moment of personal and subjective crisis (i.e., is anyone who is Hal “in there”?), he presumably encounters Don Gately through attending NA, an encounter that presumably leads them to go disinter Himself’s corpse, along with Helen/Hugh Steeply and John Wayne, in order to stave off the mass-dissemination of *Infinite Jest* (V) and its attending epidemical entertainment apocalypse.

It should be emphasized, however, that the crisis of Eschaton, the narrative rupture it causes, and the “discovery or recognition by an unexpected and instructive route” toward an end, cannot be said to constitute or resemble a “proper” (or even a familiar) apocalyptic event in terms of *Infinite Jest*’s narrative. As has been detailed above, it is difficult to argue that the Eschaton debacle does not constitute the primary crisis of the ETA narrative, but the national fantasy of MAD here is miniaturized, simulated, and domesticated—i.e., made “safe” by being made into a game played by children. It takes this very simulation of a grand world-historical peripeteia to recursively become a crisis-moment in the “real” space of the narrative. In other words, more than simply domesticating global nuclear annihilation and structurally inscribing it into any moment of narrative crisis, consequently highlighting the fundamental nuclear structure narrative itself is dependent upon in Wallace’s projected world—more than this, Eschaton’s peripeteia marks a crisis in the very materiality of literature itself, and marks a crisis of textuality. When Pemulis rages against the transgression of the limits of the coldly logical and axiomatic apocalyptic text that is Eschaton, the subject of his rage might be said to be less the actions of J.J. Penn and Evan Ingersoll, than a fundamental realization on his part of how even such a formally logical and abstract system that Eschaton defines is *incomplete*, that there are things that this abstract system simply cannot represent or contain. Pemulis’s rule-book’s attendant mathematical axioms and conversion of nuclear textuality into the wholly logical attempt to lay the basic parameters, both analog and digital, for the nuclear apocalyptic text to become *ordered*, codified, and axiomatic, to become a mathematical text without “natural” language’s attendant ambiguities. The nuclear trope, at this moment, approaches throwing off the *aporias* of language and attempts to trace a direct relationship between signifier and signified. It no longer “throws a kind of light” in a Conradian sense; Pemulis understands the nuclear to be

both the light and what the light illuminates without there being any difference between the two. In this fashion, Pemulis desires the nuclear trope to approach (though asymptotically) a “pure text.” During Eschaton, however, this ordered, axiomatic, “pure,” elegant nuclear textuality generates (mathematical) *peripeteia*. Unexpectedly, the route taken by such a totalized nuclear textuality is an encounter with a kind of Gödelian incompleteness. Wallace implicitly understands that when the nuclear text becomes wholly formalized mathematically, that nuclear textuality then must face the fact

that there really are true and significant theorems in math that can’t be proved/disproved. Which in turn means that even a maximally abstract, general, wholly formal mathematics is not going to be able to represent (or, depending on your metaphysical convictions, contain) all real-world mathematical truths. It’s this shattering of the belief that 100% abstraction = 100% truth that pure math has still not recovered from—nor is it yet even clear what “recovery” here would mean.⁶⁴⁴

The crisis of Eschaton, then, becomes a crisis of textuality, how text, and through this information itself, no matter how defined, codified, materially embodied, or systematically archived, is not only always already *incomplete*, but that this very incompleteness, this very inability for the apocalyptic to be wholly contained within the text, can then *spontaneously produce*, out of nothing besides the very materiality of its systematicity, *more text*, more narrative, crisis, and the threat of apocalypse. This is *precisely* how we should understand the Entertainment. It is an emergent phenomenon of archived textuality.

Despite Boswell’s reading of the “content” of the Entertainment, it is important to note that Wallace gives us virtually no account of the origin of this film that is reliable (let alone of the content of the film). For example, near the end of the novel, Gately, recovering from an

infected gunshot wound, has a long (potentially hallucinated) conversation with a “wraith” that is clearly Himself’s ghost. Though there is surely evidence to suggest that this conversation in fact took place⁶⁴⁵ (and that furthermore this is one of the frequent references Wallace makes throughout *Infinite Jest* to *Hamlet*), this conversation that explicitly addresses the “intention” behind the Entertainment, is not only how it is ultimately unreliable, but it explicitly invokes the intentional fallacy.

The wraith feels along his long jaw and says he spent the whole sober last ninety days of his animate life working tirelessly to contrive a medium via which he and the muted son could simply *converse*. To concoct something the gifted boy couldn’t simply master and move on from to a new plateau. Something the boy would love enough to induce him to open his mouth and come *out*—even if it was only to ask for more. Games hadn’t done it, professionals hadn’t done it, impersonation of professionals hadn’t done it. His last resort: entertainment. Make something so bloody compelling it would reverse thrust on a young self’s fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life. A magically entertaining toy to dangle at the infant still somewhere alive in the boy, to make its eyes light and toothless mouth open unconsciously, to laugh. To bring him “out of himself,” as they say. The womb could be used both ways. A way to say I AM SO VERY SORRY and have it *heard*. A life-long dream. The scholars and Foundations and disseminators never saw that his most serious wish was: *to entertain*.⁶⁴⁶

The intentionally fallacious problems here regarding Himself as *auteur* of the Entertainment—if we do in fact take this projection of Gately’s consciousness as conversing with a deceased Himself—are many. First, early in the novel Himself is frequently under the delusion that Hal is not talking, which is clearly not the case, if only for the simple reason that he responds to what

Hal says when disguised as a “conversationalist.” Second, whatever account we have received of the film, it is clearly not “entertaining” in any classical sense of the word, and furthermore, we can never have any idea what the film might be “communicating” at all. Third, whatever Himself’s intentions may have been in making the Entertainment, clearly the film is a case study in the intentional fallacy—its effects, how it is treated, how it is “understood,” were so clearly *unintended*—not to mention the fact that it was potentially never even viewed by Hal. Lastly, the “intention” of this film to bring its viewer *out* of solipsism, not only clearly fails, but has the *reverse* effect: causing the viewer of the film to be unable to communicate with *anyone*. *Infinite Jest (V)* is an object that describes a vicious loop of an interpretive aporia. The problems of intentionality and unreliability recursively create an abyss around which interpretation fails. Not only is there no clear object that could be the site of a phenomenological encounter, let alone an interpretation, the very object itself is so mired in its own inability to ever come to a presence, that any critical assessment of the film—i.e. simply *watching it*—gets sucked into its abyssal space from which no viewer can return. In other words, *we cannot read the film*.

Consequently, rather than asking us to come to grips with the film by employing anything resembling a traditional hermeneutic mode of “reading a text” or “viewing a film,” whether that mode be New Critical, psychoanalytic, deconstructive, historical, biographical, or what have you, the novel very much asks us to approach thinking about this text within its own text quite differently.

The most important aspect the world *Infinite Jest* projects with regard to textual interpretation is simply how technology has reached a point where virtually any piece of information is immediately available. Quite presciently foreseeing how advances in communication and information technology would make a nearly limitless supply of television,

films, texts, and other kinds of information accessible through the internet, *Infinite Jest* is a world thoroughly marked by information technology⁶⁴⁷:

I.e. what if—according to InterLace—what if a viewer could more or less *100% choose what's on at any given time*? Choose and rent, over PC and modem and fiber-optic line, from tens of thousands of second-run films, documentaries, the occasional sport, old beloved non-“Happy Days” programs, wholly new programs, cultural stuff, and c., all prepared by the time-tested, newly lean Big Four's [television network's] mammoth vaults and production facilities and packaged and disseminated by InterLace TelEnt. [. . .] What if the viewer could become her/his *own* programming director; what if s/he could *define* the very entertainment-happiness it was her/his right to pursue? ⁶⁴⁸

The myth imagined from these textual/technological underpinnings in *Infinite Jest* is, quite simply, the complete and total access, whenever one wants, to a “total” archive, a *hyperarchive*; and this is an archive that is nearly infinite in its capacity to accumulate. The novel imagines a fantasy of not only total and complete access to anything that has ever been made, but furthermore, an archive that is, for all intents and purposes, *infinite*. It is in the light of this formal (if fantasmatic) projection of an infinite archive with unlimited user access that the Entertainment should be understood, and it should be understood directly with regard to the system—the distributed network—that makes possible the fantasmatic projection of such an archive.

The most basic formal structure that *Infinite Jest* relies upon (more fundamentally than the Sierpinski Gasket I would argue⁶⁴⁹) is the *distributed network*. Galloway, in his book on how control functions in post-disciplinary societies, defines the distributed network as follows:

Each point in a distributed network is neither a central hub nor a satellite node—there are neither trunks nor leaves. The network contains nothing but “intelligent end-point systems that are self-deterministic, allowing each end-point system to communicate with any host it chooses.” Like the rhizome, each node in a distributed network may establish direct communication with another node, without having to appeal to a hierarchical intermediary. Yet in order to initiate communication, the two nodes must *speak the same language*.⁶⁵⁰

Though *Infinite Jest* is paginated sequentially, has a linear sequence that one cannot ignore, and contains over one-hundred pages of end-matter or “Notes and Errata,” any foray into the novel cannot but help to agree with Hayles’s assessment of it: “For such a novel any starting point would be to some extent arbitrary, for no matter where one starts, everything eventually cycles together with everything else.”⁶⁵¹ Wallace has constructed a narrative fabric, a narrative web, where each node in that narrative, each scene, character, setting, and time-period can be connected to any other through a minimum of steps. (Hal is only one step removed from Don Gately, two steps from Rodney Tine, two steps from the AFR, and only three steps from the President of the US, for example.) Part of Wallace’s ability to construct the novel in such a fashion is through its sheer archival bulkiness: in the best Borgesian sense, it attempts to be an encyclopedia for a world that does not exist. He uses snippets of letters, plagiarized reports on the origins of the AFR, film clips, a filmography, indirect and direct speech, first person and third person perspectives, calendars, multiple English (and other) dialects, etc., to achieve this. In a sense, the novel is a guide-book for narrative form. It attempts to encapsulate anything that will fit into the construction of a narrative (perhaps think of it as John Dos Passos’s *USA Trilogy* [1930-1936] for the information age). Every section of the novel attempts to communicate with

every other section. Many times the narrative conflicts that arise come from certain moments are simply a result of the novel's inability to "speak the same language" to other parts of the novel. (Gately's consciousness using words he could in no way have been familiar with in the wraith scene is a clear example of *Infinite Jest*'s network overcoming language differences.)

Consequently, to approach a discussion of the Entertainment, not only should the distributed, networked form of how texts are disseminated in the projected world be considered—how all texts within the world of *Infinite Jest* have the capability to be connected to any other text—but the very rhizomatic, networked fabric of the text itself should be emphasized in accounting for the appearance of the film. The novel, in this way, should be read as a kind of cybernetic machine. The Entertainment thereby represents a much longer history of apocalyptic fear associated with information technology and intelligent machines, a much more basic fear than an anxious projection of a US culture turned rapidly toward its television sets.

In his groundbreaking book *Cybernetics* (1948), Norbert Wiener already perceived the apocalyptic dangers of emerging computer technology. Though largely a book that serves to define a field, to think about how the science of cybernetics might be useful in a host of areas, Wiener is also constantly aware of the attendant "evil" uses information technology might be used for. He makes passing references to the atomic bomb, a potential third World War, and other potential disasters throughout the book, but a brief excerpt from the Introduction will serve to clearly highlight how information technology, even at this early stage of its development, is thoroughly inscribed by crisis and the possibility for disaster:

Those of us who have contributed to the new science of cybernetics thus stand in a moral position which is, to say the least, not very comfortable. We have contributed to the initiation of a new science which, as I have said, embraces technical developments with

great possibilities for good and for evil. We can only hand it over into the world that exists about us, and this is the world of Belsen and Hiroshima. We do not even have the choice of suppressing these new technical developments.⁶⁵²

Closer to our own moment, Steven Shaviro is equally disturbed by the disastrous potential within information and network technologies: “The threat of self-destruction is palpable to everyone, even if the event never materializes. The danger is part of the atmosphere. The apocalyptic prospect (however improbable) of Cultural Fugue seems to be—as much as the Web, or the information form itself—a defining condition of life in the network society.”⁶⁵³ Wiener and Shaviro highlight, on two sides of the historical spectrum that defines the development of what Shaviro (and others) call the “network society,” that, despite the utopian coloring information technology is often given, the democratic leveling that access to information claims to produce, there is a constant acknowledgment in information technology’s history of its potential to pose an apocalyptic threat. This is no mere paranoid projection of artificial intelligence getting out of control, or even the clear acknowledgment of how control exists within a network society. It depicts an anxiety that exists at a much more structural level, a level that understands this apocalyptic threat to be tied to the simple fact that

a network is a self-generating, self-organizing, self-sustaining system. It works through multiple feedback loops. These loops allow the system to monitor and modulate its own performance continually and thereby maintain a state of homeostatic equilibrium. At the same time, these feedback loops induce effects of interference, amplification, and resonance. And such effects permit the system to grow, both in size and in complexity.⁶⁵⁴

Wallace effectively explores throughout *Infinite Jest* how aesthetics function within such a self-generating, self-organizing, self-sustaining system. The very networked system Wallace is

principally concerned with throughout the novel is a system of *aesthetic dissemination*. If networks, by their very definition, are *self-generating*, and if a significant amount of US cultural output, in fiction, television, film, and elsewhere, is obsessed with the end, with imagining the apocalypse, what role does the imagination play in such a network? How might we both think about the aesthetics of networks and the networks of aesthetics within the perspective of not just projected disaster, but a disaster that is perhaps *desired*? The Entertainment is the node in Wallace's network that these questions are constantly revolving around. As such, rather than trying to discern any "origin" to this work of art, let alone an authorial node which brought it into being, the novel everywhere asks us to consider the structural conditions which made it possible, which allowed it to *emerge*.

One of the most fascinating moments in the novel regarding how *Infinite Jest* (V) may have come about, especially for anyone with a scholarly bent, is the long endnote that gives us Himself's filmography. Covering nine pages with 78 entries, this archive of Himself's work is both exhaustingly detailed and maddeningly incomplete. For the entries on films that are readily available to the public and generally known, Wallace gives us exactly precise detail on the production company, the film-size and -speed used, the length, color, and sound of each film, and in what format(s) it was disseminated. For many of the films, he also gives us captivating synopses of their content.⁶⁵⁵ For other films, however, very little to no information whatsoever is given. There are six films bearing titles that are "Unfinished. UNRELEASED."⁶⁵⁶ There are four films that are all "*Untitled*. Unfinished. URELEASED." There are also *Found Dramas I-VI* and *IX-XI*, which are "conceptual, conceptually unfilmable. UNRELEASED."⁶⁵⁷ Himself's films that do exist and whose content is clear also range across an incredibly wide spectrum of different filmic practices: technical experiments, public relations productions, documentaries, the

experimental “*après-garde*,” infomercials, genre-pieces, attempts at commercial film, and even *The Joke*, advertised as: “*You Are Strongly Advised NOT To Shell Out Money to See This Film*,”⁶⁵⁸ a film that “*Film & Kartridge Kultcher’s* Sperber credited [. . .] with ‘unwittingly sounding the death-knell of post-poststructural film in terms of sheer annoyance.’”⁶⁵⁹ Indeed, *Infinite Jest* invites scholarly attention toward Himself’s filmography. His work is so prodigious, multiplicitous, and theoretically complex that the novel practically begs for an academic article to be written on Himself’s work (and is itself such an article).

Such an article, however, would have to confront the same interpretive aporia that the Entertainment presents. With the few exceptions when Hal is either viewing Himself’s films or Joelle is describing them, the majority of the aesthetic objects in this archive cannot be approached *as* objects. Whether exactly described or simply unseen, unfinished, and unreleased, they only come to any kind of presence within the novel through their archivization, through this listing and cataloguing, through an overt textuality. Many of the films contain interesting hints about the narrative, Himself’s consciousness, the political and historical realities of the novel, the technology of the novel’s world, and other characters in the novel (Incandenza used many of the people around ETA and Joelle herself as actors). More than presenting a kind of puzzle or mystery to be solved vis-à-vis Himself’s archive and the space of *Infinite Jest*, however, what these hints serve to do is to highlight the *network* that exists between these texts. Not a single entry can really be considered without all of the others. Each little detail in each entry serves to point toward other entries and toward other moments in the novel. For example, *Baby Pictures of Famous Dictators* shows “children and adolescents play[ing] a near incomprehensible nuclear strategy game with tennis equipment against the real or holographic(?) backdrop of sabotaged ATHSCME 1900 atmospheric displacement towers exploding and

toppling during the New New England Chemical Emergency of Y.W. CELLULOID (UNRELEASED)”; or *As of Yore*: “a middle-aged tennis instructor, preparing to instruct his son in tennis, becomes intoxicated in the family’s garage and subjects his son to a rambling monologue while the son weeps and perspires.”⁶⁶⁰ This catalogue of films emphasizes *itself*, the *list*, the *archive*, the *accumulation* of texts, and an accumulation of texts by someone (Himself) who ultimately remains a filmic amateur, someone who started making films as more-or-less a hobby after a fabulously successful career as an optical engineer and the Headmaster of an elite tennis academy.

Wallace walks the line between what Umberto Eco calls the list of “coherent excess” and the list of “chaotic enumeration” with this filmography. The list of coherent excess, though “made impracticable by superabundance,” nevertheless, “no matter how excessive [the] list may be it is not chaotic.”⁶⁶¹ The list of chaotic enumeration, on the other hand, “delight[s] in introducing the absolutely heterogeneous [. . .] in order to bring out new relationships between distant things.”⁶⁶² Both of these poles must be kept in mind when thinking not only about how Wallace’s list functions, but the Entertainment’s relationship to that list. Himself’s filmography is, for the most part, excessively coherent, detailed, academic, careful, and each entry so clearly engages with the novel in some fashion that we cannot accuse Wallace of mere onanistic textual accumulation here—i.e., it is not chaotic. On the other hand, there is a marked heterogeneity to the list, nowhere highlighted better than by the information we *do not* get. The archive is presented as an entry in the “*ONANite Film and Cartridge Studies Annual*.”⁶⁶³ This list has all the authority of intense scholarly attention and care, and yet none of the authority and (at times) omniscience of the narrator of the majority of *Infinite Jest*. This is not an archive produced by omniscience. It is incomplete, fractured, unknown, unseen, unreleased. It may be the best that is

available, but it is not the “whole.” There is a chaotic “real” either within or outside the archive that cannot be captured by that archivization, by that listing. All we get is black and white, silent markers on a page that can merely point toward complex chaos, a swirling disorder of how these films form a network.

In this list, Himself’s attempts at *Infinite Jest* (the film) form the central nodes between the order and chaos of the list, between its excess and enumeration. Significantly, *Infinite Jest (I)* is “black and white; silent. Incandenza’s first attempt at commercial entertainment.

UNRELEASED.”⁶⁶⁴ This first attempt at *Infinite Jest* is clearly textual: black and white and silent. It is a poststructural textual-object that highlights its textuality while being wholly absent.

Infinite Jest (II), the attempted remake of the first film, is also “black and white; silent.”⁶⁶⁵

Infinite Jest (III) adds color and sound, but remains unfinished, unseen, and unreleased. *Infinite*

Jest (IV) lists two actors, “Pam Heath (?) [and] Madame Psychosis (?)”⁶⁶⁶ but not only do the question marks in the text highlight the speculative nature of claiming there are known actors in this film, but they constitute acts of textual erasure, making it impossible to “know” anything about the film; and of course it is also unfinished, unseen, and unreleased. Each attempt at

Infinite Jest appears in this archive as wholly outside the capacity for the archive to capture it in any way. Even when little details may be known about the production of each film, they retreat from the attempt to exhaustively accumulate, and provide unlimited access to, the archive. In this way, not only is InterLace TelEntertainment’s dream of total access to an entertainment archive clearly a fantasy, but the very inability for the network to capture the unknown, self-generating parts of that network, lay the very foundations for that network’s dissolution *through* that network.

The Entertainment or *Infinite Jest* (V) is precisely the piece of that archive that threatens not only the network, but the entire world in which that network exists, and as such its description deserves lengthy quotation:

Infinite Jest (V?). Year of the Trial-Size Dove Bar. Poor Yorick Entertainment Unlimited.

“Madame Psychosis”; no other definitive data. Thorny problem for archivists.

Incandenza’s last film, Incandenza’s death occurring during its post-production. Most archival authorities list as unfinished, unseen. Some list as completion of *Infinite Jest* (IV), for which Incandenza also used “Psychosis,” thus list the film under Incandenza’s output for Y.T.M.P. Though no scholarly synopsis or report of viewing exists, two short essays in different issues of *Cartridge Quarterly East* refer to the film as “extraordinary” and “far and away (James O. Incandenza’s) most entertaining and compelling work.”

West Coast archivists list the film’s gauge as “16 . . . 78 . . . *n* mm.,” basing the gauge on critical allusions to “radical experiments in viewers optical perspective and context” as *IJ* (V?)’s distinctive feature. Though Canadian archivist Tête-Bêche lists the film as completed privately and distributed by P.Y.E.U through posthumous provisions in the filmmaker’s will, all other comprehensive filmographies have the film either unfinished or UNRELEASED, its Master cartridge either destroyed or vaulted *sui testator*.⁶⁶⁷

What this entry on the Entertainment reveals, perhaps more than any other place in the novel, is the *absolute inability* for it to be incorporated not only into the archive, but into the network. We can more-or-less be sure that Joelle/Madame Psychosis appeared in the film, that it was Himself’s last film, and that it definitely *exists*, but that is about it. The scholars who are writing about this film in *Cartridge Quarterly East* clearly could not have seen the film, for they are still upright, non-catatonic, and writing. Scholarly, archival, interpretive attention to the work is

impossible, even though the “West Coast archivists” claim that its film gauge approaches the infinite. We cannot even really be sure what the film is *called*, whether *Infinite Jest* (IV), (V), or (perhaps) (VI). It is both the obscene supplement to this archive, what excessively and chaotically overflows the attempt to capture it as an aesthetic object, while simultaneously being wholly absent. It is defined by a highly developed desire for order while being chaotic, unapproachable, unknowable, incomplete. Whatever the Entertainment is, whatever it is “about” cannot only not be known, the basic structures that permit such a knowledge (the archive) also prevent such knowledge.

So rather than attempt to “understand” the Entertainment, Wallace is constantly asking us to consider its impossible textuality, to consider it as something that not only we cannot know, but something that defines a highly complex level of aesthetic order—a level we cannot understand—in that the film has achieved a kind of “pure” or “perfect” level of aesthetics. It represents the ultimate desire on the part of any artist: to make something so captivating no one can look away. In this way, it achieves “what we really want, when we think that we love a work of art [. . .] for it to overwhelm us, trample us, crush us into bits. We hate and resent creators, above all, because they see right through us: they understand our secret lust for annihilation, and they offer to fulfill it.”⁶⁶⁸ The Entertainment fulfills the “secret lust for annihilation” everywhere marking the world of *Infinite Jest*, and it does so by achieving a kind of pure aesthetic mode. Through archivization, through the complexly ordered and chaotically enumerated network of Himself’s films, grounded upon the network of entertainment within the novel’s world, it is able to achieve this mode.

Infinite Jest (V) or the Entertainment in the world of *Infinite Jest* is a phenomenon of *aesthetic emergence*. No intentionality, no recourse to the *auteur*’s *oeuvre*, no hermeneutic

practice can explain it. Its perfection of aesthetics, its complete fulfillment of aesthetic desire, is clearly a fantasmatic limit, but a limit that, if we take away the idea of the film being an individual expression of Himself, is one that can be reached emergently. The film is an aesthetic object that has reached a higher level of aesthetic order than any single node in the entertainment network of the novel. Yes, the network, taken as a whole, may almost totally absorb the US citizenry who is engaging with it, but viewers of TV can still choose to turn their teleputers off. The Entertainment cannot be turned off. Grounded in the network, *Infinite Jest* (V) is a moment of aesthetic self-organization, of morphogenesis, of autopoiesis. The Entertainment is an *emergent* phenomenon.

Steven Johnson, writing on the science of studying self-organization, defines emergence quite simply: “the movement from low-level rules to higher-level sophistication.”⁶⁶⁹ Emergent systems are everywhere, from the patterns formed out of chaotic “inert” matter, to the high level of intelligence shown by ant colonies and slime molds, to cities, to specific formations in communications networks themselves. These systems,

in the simplest terms [. . .] solve problems by drawing on masses of relatively stupid elements, rather than a single, intelligent “executive branch.” They are bottom-up systems, not top down. They get their smarts from below. In more technical language, they are complex adaptive systems that display emergent behavior. In these systems, agents residing on one scale start producing behavior that lies one scale above them: ants create colonies; urbanites create neighborhoods; simple pattern-recognition software learns how to recommend new books.⁶⁷⁰

Johnson defines three levels of emergence: complex: “with multiple agents dynamically interacting in multiple ways”⁶⁷¹; dynamic: systems that “rarely settle in on a single, frozen shape;

they form patterns in time as well as space”⁶⁷²; and *artificial*. It is artificial emergence that mainly that concerns Johnson, and this is also the mode of emergence that can account for the Entertainment. Artificial emergence, “one that began sometime in the past decade [the 1990s],” occurred when

we stopped analyzing emergence and started creating it. We began building self-organizing systems into our software applications, our video games, our *art*, our music. [. . .] For as long as complex organisms have been alive, they have lived under the laws of self-organization, but in recent years our day-to-day life has become overrun with *artificial* emergence: systems built with a conscious understanding of what emergence is, systems to exploit those laws the same way our nuclear reactors exploit the laws of atomic physics. Up to now, the philosophers of emergence have struggled to interpret the world. But they are now starting to change it.⁶⁷³

In *Emergence* Johnson speculates how systems of artificial emergence will develop as the science of emergence becomes self-aware. And for the purposes of thinking about the Entertainment, it is highly significant that he focuses on *media*-emergence near the end of his book. Such media emergence occurs when

suddenly, every miniseries, every dance remix, every thriller, every music video ever made, is available from anywhere, anytime. The grid shatters into a million free-floating agents, roaming aimlessly across the landscape like those original slime mold cells. All chaos, no order. And then, slowly, clusters begin to form, shapes emerging out of the shapelessness. [. . .] The Web will contribute the metadata that enables these clusters to self-organize.⁶⁷⁴

With the concept of artificial self-organization in mind, it is nearly impossible to not understand the Entertainment as just such a cluster emerging out of the chaos of both Himself's archived network of texts/films, as well an emergence from the greater chaos of InterLace TelEntertainment. What appears shapeless and chaotic—the archive of Himself's filmic output—becomes ordered *not* by Wallace's highly ordered, academic list, but by the final, emergent entry into that list, *Infinite Jest* (V). And, like distributed networks themselves, “emergent systems can work toward different types of goals: some of them admirable, some of them destructive.”⁶⁷⁵

And nowhere let it be claimed that the Entertainment is not destructive. Its emergent properties threaten the world with an absolute, textual, entertainment apocalypse. It takes what Shaviro says about why film is attractive to the *n*th degree:

What film offers its viewers is something far more compelling and disturbing: a Bataillean ecstasy of expenditure, of automutilation and self-abandonment [. . .] the blinding contact with the real. In affirming raw sensation, in communicating the violent contents of visual excitation apart from its pacifying forms, and in provoking visceral excitation, film hyperbolically aggravates vision, pushing it to an extreme point of implosion and self-annihilation.⁶⁷⁶

In a very real sense, the “self-annihilation” that Himself spent most of his career working on—nuclear weaponry, annular fusion, a tennis academy who gets its kicks from Eschaton—aesthetically emerges from the Entertainment. Here, the nuclear trope, having become wholly textual through the Eschaton scene, *textually emerges*, ordering the incompleteness inherent in such a mathematical apocalyptic simulation. Text itself becomes nuclear, apocalyptic, disastrous, a point of “real world” crisis. The Entertainment is the crisis and peripeteia of Eschaton writ large. It is the emergence of the nuclear, not as an “event,” a moment where the bomb explodes,

a moment of destruction, of indetermination, of a nothingness violently introduced into the real, but rather of an *accumulation*, semiotic ordering, network distribution, and rhizomatic assemblage of the real itself, of materiality and the materiality of text becoming apocalyptic. *Infinite Jest* (V), perhaps more than any other construction in the American nuclear imagination, emphasizes the destructive capacity of what happens when the archive becomes a *hyperarchive*, accumulating toward infinity, every entry connected at every moment to every other entry. If the American eschatological anxiety and desire is for total annihilation, *Infinite Jest* highlights that even without the “presence” of the nuclear bomb, or indeed even without the teleological end to America’s Cold War narrative, annihilation—even in “progress”—remains a dominant form in the cultural imagination.

And it is precisely such formations of the imagination which Wallace was engaged in combating throughout his entire *oeuvre*, and most explicitly in *Infinite Jest*. With the Entertainment he pushes the Armageddon-type explosion meta-fiction has always been about to its ridiculous, hyperbolic end: a postmodern, metafictional (or metafilmic) text capable of producing the apocalypse. At a few curious moments in the novel,⁶⁷⁷ Wallace even gives us the possibility that an “anti-*samizdat*,” an “anti-Entertainment” exists. Whether it exists or not, however, is wholly besides the point, for it is clear that *Infinite Jest itself* endeavors to be such an “anti-Entertainment.” Though I have not discussed the other major half of the novel that follows Don Gately and the residents of the Ennet (Halfway) House, this half of the novel is not only “non-eschatological,” but is “anti-eschatological.” The possibilities for empathy, human connection, communication, fighting the addictions attendant to postmodern living, and the liberatory potential of sincerity—all of these Wallace explores with such exacting care, complexity, and hope, that it is difficult to not think that Wallace’s ultimate goal with the novel

was, like Himself's goal with *Infinite Jest* (V), to communicate with a silent reader, to make that reader speak to the author, and to somehow provide a balm for what Wallace always saw as the principle problem of individuation: loneliness; *Infinite Jest* succeeds where *Infinite Jest* (V) fails.

But this has already been fairly well-understood about Wallace's larger goals as a writer and his specific goals in *Infinite Jest*. What makes the novel so remarkable within the apocalyptic tradition it is part of, is that it constructs an *anti*-eschatological aesthetic, a narrative mode that not only does not need the ideologically abused rhetoric of ends, crises, and catastrophes, but constructs a mode that attempts to do away with such discourse once and for all by pushing hyperbolically past its own end. Wallace so thoroughly uses (and abuses) the nuclear trope, that throughout the rest of his work it becomes unnecessary. Nowhere is his writing after *Infinite Jest* marked by any apocalyptic fear or desire, but rather points forward to a present that does not end, and how the American imagination might continue without a *telos*, without a narrative. If the Entertainment traces the destructive capacities for aesthetic emergence, then Wallace's own entertainment materially traces emergent possibility, creation, potential, and ultimately, hope.

4.5 “DATUM CENTURIO”: AT THE END OF ENDS, TOWARD A HYPERARCHIVAL REALISM

And when he came back to, he was flat on his back on the beach in the freezing sand, and it was raining out of a low sky, and the tide was way out.

—David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*⁶⁷⁸

It is nearly impossible to read the above epigraph, the final sentence of *Infinite Jest*, without hearing the echoes of other important endings within the American and nuclear traditions, particularly (but of course not limited to) the final scenes in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), and Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* (1957). Wallace, like these writers, ends his novel with a contemplation of what Sigmund Freud's friend once called "a feeling which he would like to call a sensation of 'eternity,' a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded—as it were, 'oceanic.'"⁶⁷⁹ Consider, for instance, Melville's sense of the "oceanic" at the end of *Moby-Dick* when Ishmael, the Pequod having just sunk, is stranded at sea, not yet floating on his life-preserving coffin: "Now small fowls flew screaming over the yet yawning gulf; a sullen white surf beat against its steep sides; then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago."⁶⁸⁰ Or else the end of *The Great Gatsby* when Nick, having

wandered down to the beach and sprawled out on the sand [. . .] became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.⁶⁸¹

And Shute's novel, one of the first novels to explicitly explore a nuclear apocalypse, ends with Mary quite literally "on the beach": "The sea lay before her, grey and rough with great rollers coming in from the south on to the rocky beach below. The ocean was empty and grey beneath the overcast, but away to the east there was a break in the clouds and a shaft of light striking

down on to the waters. [. . .] She sat there dumbly watching as the low grey shape went forward to the mist on the horizon, holding the bottle on her knee. This was the end of it, the very, very end.”⁶⁸²

We can safely assume here that Wallace is drawing from all of these moments, from a long tradition of ending novels—American, nuclear, or otherwise—“on the beach,” a tradition of ending novels by confronting the oceanic and the eternal by emphasizing human finitude when considered in the face of the gaping, abyssal maw of the infinite. Significantly, however, unlike Melville, Fitzgerald, or Shute’s novels, this moment of the novel is not *actually* the end. In fact, it is not even “the beginning,” nor anything in between; for what we are given in this scene is a (perhaps drug-induced) flashback Don Gately has while recovering from an infected gunshot wound in the hospital, recalling a scene that took place before the events of the novel proper. In this flashback Gately does not “make his way to the beach,” or follow some teleological quest to its fatal, unavoidable culmination like Ishmael. He is *placed* there. The sentence before this he is in an apartment, about to witness the murder of his friend before slipping into drug-induced unconsciousness, “with his eyes closing as the floor finally pounced.”⁶⁸³ Wallace not only does not give us the linear, narrative line that would connect this moment to Gately’s oceanic moment, but, in fact, he gives us no other sequence that would get us to this final sentence either.

Considered simply in the terms of fulfilling narrative expectations, this final scene, as has been commented upon by virtually anyone who has read the novel, is unsatisfactory. It does not have the sense of fleeting human endeavor in the face of the eternal, unchanging ocean that *Moby-Dick* has, nor the final complex temporal image of *Gatsby*—“so we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past”⁶⁸⁴—nor the utter hopelessness of simply waiting for the radiation cloud—the very, very end—in *On the Beach*. For, as has been

mentioned above, *Infinite Jest*'s end is its beginning, its "actual" end takes place before the beginning, and the Entertainment apocalypse, the *eschaton* of the projected world, is withheld. (In the American tradition, Wallace is much closer in terms of temporality, eschatology, and teleology to the Whitman of "Song of Myself": "I have heard what the talkers were talking, the talk of the beginning and the end, / But I do not talk of the beginning or the end."⁶⁸⁵)

What Wallace achieves in this final line is the culmination of his anti-eschatological project. No path through *Infinite Jest*—linear, non-linear, or otherwise—can get us to this final sentence. We cannot follow Gately's (or anyone else's) *consciousness* toward this line (for he is unconscious). There is no coherent narrative sequence that will take us to it. As it takes place before the events of the novel, there is also absolutely no reference to this moment anywhere else that would be temporally after it. The line, like Gately himself, is *literally placed at an end which has no relationship to the narrative*. But it does not come out of nowhere. More than even placing Gately in this classic position of an oceanic end, he is placing Melville, Fitzgerald, and Shute at the end of the novel. He is taking the oceanic narrative trope itself, and ending with that, and in a sense, *ending that ending*.

If Melville forces us to think of the biblical (and apocalyptic) past of the flood, Fitzgerald to inhabit a present constantly bombarded by our own difficult and violent history as we struggle into the future, and Shute a future where the human has disappeared, Wallace, in one fell swoop, achieves a narrative mode that not only inhabits a kind of Whitmanian perpetual present, but takes the discourse of the apocalypse off the table completely. The final sentence of *Infinite Jest* is merely its final sentence, not its end, not its beginning, not its midst, just a moment, a moment like any other, but a moment freed of the ends it invokes and concludes. If it is the end

of anything, in any sense of the term, it is the end of the Armageddon-type explosion *fiction* has always been about.

It is fitting, then, that Wallace's work following *Infinite Jest* never again returns to the apocalyptic mode that has been so exhaustively explored here; nor does he ever again project a (dystopian) future as he does in *The Broom of the System* or *Infinite Jest*, except in one significant story which, to my knowledge, remains mostly untouched in terms of critical engagement.⁶⁸⁶

"Datum Centurio" is a unique and curious story considered against the rest of Wallace's *oeuvre*. Collected in *Brief Interview with Hideous Men*, it is the only story of his that might properly be called "science fiction" and, indeed, "posthuman." It is also hardly a story at all—especially in Wallace's terms—in that "Datum Centurio" is ostensibly a four-and-a-half page dictionary entry on the word "date." This entry is imaginatively said to come "from *Leckie & Webster's Connotationally Gender-Specific Lexicon of Contemporary Usage*,"⁶⁸⁷ published in the year 2096. In short, this "story" gives us the different definitions of a particular sense of the word "date" as understood in 2096, not in terms of the sense that designates a particular day in history, nor in the sense that something old is "dated." Rather the entry endeavors to give a specific account of the evolution of the word date from the "univocal 20C definition of **date**³: '(a) social engagement(s) with (a) member(s) of the opposite sex (Webster's V, 1999, ROM/print).'"⁶⁸⁸

Given the context of the entire story, Wallace's goal with this piece is to imagine a future in which "dating" is completely mechanized, consisting of either a "soft date": "the process of voluntarily submitting one's nucleotide configurations and other Procreativity Designators to an agency empowered by law to identify an optimal female neurogenetic complement for the

purposes of Procreative Genital Interface”; or else a “hard date”: “the creation and/or use of a Virtual Female Sensory Array [. . .] for the purposes of Simulated Genital Interface.”⁶⁸⁹

Considering how the majority of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* is devoted to exploring sexual relationships generally, and the various permutations relationships between men and women may undergo specifically, “Datum Centurio” is engaged with questioning and problematizing contemporary sexual practices taken to their functional and masturbatory extreme. And, like much of the rest of the collection in which it appears, the story is massively successful in simply raising questions regarding the mere possibility (or impossibility) of authentic, intimate, human connection.

For my purposes here, however, I am more interested in simply the *form* through which Wallace frames and produces these questions, a form that deserves a lengthy quotation to highlight the archival textuality of this story. This future dictionary defines dating in the 20th century as follows:

Nash & Leckie’s Condensed DVD₂ History of Male Sexuality notes that for 20C males, **date** as intergender “social engagement” could connote either of two highly distinct endeavors: (A) the mutual exploration of possibilities for neurogenetic compatibility (KEY at Historical Note (5) for RELATIONSHIP), leading to legally codified intergender union and P.G.I. and soft offspring; or (B) the unilateral pursuit of an immediate, vigorous, and uncoded episode of genital interface without regard to neurogenetic compatibility or soft offspring or even a telephone call the next day. Because—according to R. and F. Leckie, eds., *DFX Lattice of Monochromosomal Psyche*—the connotational range of **date**³ as “social engagement” for 20C females was almost exclusively (A), whereas an implicit but often unspoken and just as often

fraudulent interest in connotation (A) was often employed by 20C males for purposes related exclusively to connotation (B) (KEY at LOTHARIONISM; at SPORTFUCKING‡ [‡=Of idiomatic origin]; at MISOGAMY; at LIZARDY, LOUNGE-‡; at OEDIPAL, PRE-), the result of an estimated 86.5% of 20C **dates** was a state of severe emotional dissonance between the **date**'s participants, a dissonance attributed by most sources to basic psychosemantic miscodings (KEY at MISCODINGS, INTERGENDER; Secondary KEYS at Historical Notes for MISOGAMY, OSTENSIBLE PROJECTED FORMS OF; for VICTIMIZATION, CULTURE OF; for FEMINISM, MALEVOLENT SEPARATIST OF EARLY U.S. 21C; for SEXUAL REVOLUTION OF LATE 20C, PATHETIC DELUSIONS OF).⁶⁹⁰

With “Datum Centurio” Wallace produces what I have called *hyperarchival realism*. The “story” or “entry” is only a incredibly miniscule fragment of what can only be a massive dictionary, a digital “DVD₃” that presumably puts the *Oxford English Dictionary* to shame. But even given merely this small fragment, an entire world is projected *archivally*, a world with a complex social, political, and technological reality, a world with not only a complicated history, but a history that endeavors to read its own past (our present) through what texts are available, through what remains of the archive. Furthermore, this is a textuality that not only makes a gesture to digital texts’ ability to be hyperlinked, but to even read the story requires imagining what these other texts being “keyed” to are. The language of the entry absolutely depends upon smashing together an imagined future lexicon with contemporary idiomatic usage, creating a mélange of disturbing, clever, funny, and weighty signification that both highlights the perennial narrative fascination with human sexual relationships as well as emphasizing the banality and cliché of such narratives. Furthermore, the complex array of signification produced by “Datum

Centurio” is produced *emergently* in the same fashion that the Entertainment emerges from the archive of Himself’s work in *Infinite Jest*. Through the complex interaction of many layers of textual and archival practices—dictionary definitions, particular historical idioms (i.e. “lounge lizard”), neologisms (“psychosemantic”), political history, quantified data, imagined authoritative texts, technical language, gender difference, etc.—Wallace achieves a level of realism that is wholly dependent upon *archival form*. The recursive production of text, of archival textuality, rather than removing itself from the real through an endless layering of mediation, forces an encounter with one of the most basic facts of any experience of reality: the impossibility for any subject to ever connect with or understand an other.

In the long narrative of nuclear textuality I have been exploring through Wallace, “Datum Centurio” points to an imagination that is *post-nuclear*. The obsessions and anxieties pervading this short story are not those of archival destruction, nor those of archival accumulation. Both of these *are a given part of the reality of the text*. Projecting this dictionary definition into the year 2096, the disappearance of text, the inability for even this massive dictionary and archive to access texts, is a given. The above definition of “date” is wholly dependent upon the disappearance, destruction, and deletion of texts in its oversimplification of our own present reality with regard to dating “dating”; but it is simultaneously dependent upon the codification, interpretation, and simplification of what exists in the archive—i.e., it can boil down the entire minefield of late 20th century sexual relations to this brief definition. On the other hand, it simultaneously takes archival accumulation and its potential destructive capacity as a given as well. The definition of date is weighed down by a *massive* archival textuality that, though we do not have access to it—let alone to the other definitions of “date”—cannot help but be felt; there is an infinite (and inaccessible) world history here, and not in an abstract Borgesian sense, but in

the specific, concrete experience of a totality that this fragment projects. “Datum Centurio” functions as a world projecting hologram. But this archival textuality, rather than bordering on or producing an absolute destruction of meaning—as with *Infinite Jest* (V)—is a simple reality given the projected advances in information technology. Furthermore, though the dystopian nature of “Datum Centurio” cannot help but to be felt by our own experience of contemporary dating practices, it does not *necessarily* present the historical change in human relationships as necessarily a negative thing, but rather merely presents a (more-or-less) objective account of this change. In other words, the clearly techno-futuristic world of the story is not marked by any apocalyptic type of change or end, let alone any clear sense of *crisis*; it just is. With “Datum Centurio” Wallace cannot be said to be participating in any eschatological, paranoid, anxious, and doom-speaking discourse. The future here for Wallace, so unlike *The Broom of the System*, “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way,” and *Infinite Jest*, is not one marked by catastrophe, disaster, and annihilation. The world of “Datum Centurio” is not utopian by any means, but it is a world of human continuity and change, a world that—though perhaps slightly ridiculous—is nevertheless *anti-eschatological*. This hyperarchival realism that Wallace produces in “Datum Centurio” is a narrative mode not dependent upon crises or ends, but rather emphasizes the connections between texts with all the attendant destruction and accumulation accompanying such connections—the inherently temporal, fluid, dynamic, and vitally material nature of any textuality whatsoever.

This is not to suggest that Wallace somehow, in a teleological manner, *concludes* the nuclear imagination, that he somehow *completes* a twentieth century American or postmodern project, but that, like so many other places in his work, he takes up the very real problems of this imagination and, by pushing its form past where it had previously been willing to go, punctures

through this imagination to arrive somewhere else. Obviously one need not look very far at the present moment to see the continued persistence of the nuclear imagination—the recent earthquake in Japan and the accompanying nuclear meltdowns being perhaps the most obvious case—but with Wallace the potential for new formulations of this imagination are not only clearly possible, but we can see how such formulations can take up the anxieties marked by technologies of destruction and accumulation, between nuclear and information technology, between the apocalypse and the digital dystopia, and point toward directions that need not be obsessively marked and over-determined by these technologies nor visions of the apocalypse. With the work of David Foster Wallace we can see a clear example of the potential for articulating a non-apocalyptic American and indeed global imagination, an imagination that, post-11 September 2001 and after what Alain Badiou calls the twentieth century’s “passion for the real,” desperately needs to be explored further if the cultural thanoptic fantasy of annihilation is not to become a reality.

5.0 CODA: APOCALYPSE NETWORKS: REPRESENTING THE NUCLEAR ARCHIVE

I considered fire, but I feared that the burning of an infinite book might be similarly infinite, and suffocate the planet in smoke.

—Jorge Luis Borges, “The Book of Sand”⁶⁹¹

5.1 THE BIG RED BUTTON AND THE KILL SWITCH

During the summer of 2010 Senator Joseph Lieberman proposed a bill for an Internet “kill switch,” a bill that would grant the President of the United States the “far-reaching emergency powers to seize control of or even shut down portions of the Internet.”⁶⁹² Though Lieberman quickly qualified the reach of his Protecting Cyberspace as a National Asset Act (PCNAA), stressing the relatively limited control it would grant the President,⁶⁹³ the idea of an Internet kill switch should give one significant pause in terms of the nuclear imagination of the twentieth century. The metaphor of the kill switch, a singular button or device that gives the President of the United States instantaneous control over a significant portion of a vast and powerful network is a trope whose origins clearly reside in the Cold War’s semi-mythical “Big Red Button.” The prospect of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), the dominant US national fantasy of the mid-twentieth century, was often understood in the popular imagination as potentially resulting from a single action. And indeed, the instantaneity and abstraction of global nuclear war necessitated such a singular metaphor in order for the massive systemic complexity of the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) and its global capabilities to be comprehended. But the

technological, political, and economic realities surrounding nuclear capability are simply too complex to be captured by The Button in precisely the same way that Lieberman's bill is a fantasmatic and reactionary attempt to explain and control an even more complex system than NORAD. The Internet, like the international capability of waging nuclear war, is simply too systemically and asymmetrically massive to be controlled in such a singular fashion.

Among other things, the metaphors of the Big Red Button and the Internet kill switch emerge from an encounter with what Fredric Jameson famously calls the postmodern sublime. These two metaphors should be seen as “degraded attempts—through the figuration of advanced technology—to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system.”⁶⁹⁴ The button and the switch stand in for totalities, for the vast networks of communication they control and the catastrophic potential destruction they represent. These systems are too large and complex to be “cognitively mapped.” Consequently, they are often represented in popular expression as singular metaphors that only vaguely correspond to the reality they represent, reifying the totalities that they stand in for, while their symbolic value and speculative projection have serious consequences in the world risk society. Even though Lieberman's bill died fairly quickly on the floor of Congress, it is representative of the power and persistence of the nuclear referent to shape juridical practice and political discourse (even in the perceived *absence* of that referent).

Thus the PCNAA, like the other twenty-first century speculative projections of archival destruction that I will be exploring in this coda, should be read as a significant and telling manifestation of the nuclear imagination of the present age. The speculative eschatological narrative of the United States' power over instantaneous material destruction on a nearly unimaginable, species-wide scale has transformed in the wake of the Cold War, the attacks of 11 September 2001, the subsequent War on Terror, the global emergence of Internet 2.0, the global

financial crisis, and observable climate change into a fantasmatic projection of informational control and ecological catastrophe. Like MAD, the material consequences of deploying an Internet kill switch, with even a slight amount of imaginative extrapolation, would clearly be disastrous considering the global reliance on the Internet for a great many of the species' economic, political, social, biological, and ecological activities.

Further, there are interesting parallels to be drawn between the speculative narratives implicit in the PCNAA and the nuclear imagination. Recall that the Internet itself was largely an outgrowth of the perceived threat of MAD and the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPAnet). As media theorist Alexander Galloway notes in *Protocol*: "While many have debated the origins of the Internet, it's clear that in many ways it was built to withstand nuclear attack. The Net was designed as a solution to the vulnerability of the military's centralized system of command and control during the late 1950s and beyond. For, the argument goes, if there are no central command centers, then there can be no central targets and overall damage is reduced."⁶⁹⁵ The irony of Lieberman's bill is considerable. By making one system more structurally complex in order to stave off an imagined disaster, a system has emerged that is too complex to control and politicians are now attempting to legislate the capability to destroy or disable that original system in case of disaster, terrorism, or political unrest. Though a gross oversimplification, this, along with other reasons, is why Galloway further suggests that, "If one can consider nuclear attacks the most highly energetic, dominating, and centralized force that one knows—an archetype of the modern era—then the Net is at once *the solution to and the inversion of* this massive material threat, for it is precisely noncentralized, nondominating, and nonhostile."⁶⁹⁶ Cybernetic and nuclear technologies, which share their origins in significant American and British military efforts during the Second World War,⁶⁹⁷ should thus be read as

structurally and historically intertwined. A nuclear criticism following the Cold War cannot ignore the imaginative and historical forces produced by the continued dialogue between information and military technologies, between the archive and the bomb, between the decentralization of the first nuclear age and the networked distribution of the second age in which the nuclear referent has dispersed in a variety of ways, some of which I will be attending to here.

Among the many crucial insights of Derrida's "No Apocalypse, Not Now" is his emphasis that fantasies of nuclear destruction should primarily be understood as projections of archival destruction:

Now, what the uniqueness of nuclear war, its being-for-the-first-time-and-perhaps-for-the-last-time, its absolute inventiveness gives us to think, even if it remains a decoy, a belief, a [f]antasmatic projection, is obviously the possibility of an irreversible destruction, leaving no traces, of the juridico-literary archive and therefore of the basis of literature and criticism. [. . .] The hypothesis we are considering here is that of a total and remainderless destruction of the archive.⁶⁹⁸

Lieberman's PCNAA, which at the time of this writing remains a fantasy, follows from this nuclear critical hypothesis and defines the eschatological limit of the archive along a different, yet parallel line; the contemporary archive *par excellence*, the Internet, here becomes capable of destroying itself, a capability that depends upon its underlying nuclear logic. And its disappearance would accompany some catastrophe or else would be catastrophic itself. During the second nuclear age the hypothesis of total archival destruction, though initially given to thought by the possibility of nuclear war, sheds its initial nuclear trappings and the destruction of the archive is given to thought *by nothing outside of archival processes themselves*.⁶⁹⁹

To map this transformation from the archive threatened by global thermonuclear war to the archive's threat to itself deserves a significant amount of attention, as the frequent juxtaposition of nuclear war and archival destruction in literary texts during the twentieth century more than demonstrate. Literature has long been fascinated by and anxious about its material disappearance and erasure. And yet, as Fernando Báez asks, "There are hundreds of studies on the origin of books and libraries, but there is not a single history of their destruction. Isn't that a suspicious absence?"⁷⁰⁰ During the middle of the twentieth century these histories did in fact proliferate, but they were often set in the future and they were mostly fictional. The bomb's imaginary, its relationship to history, and its non-event allowed (and for many writers required) narratives to project not only material destruction on an unprecedented scale, but, as Derrida suggests, archival destruction that "lack[s] any common proportion with, for example, the burning of a library, even that of Alexandria, which occasioned so many written accounts and nourished so many literatures."⁷⁰¹

In this coda I will sketch a history of what I call the *tale of archival crisis* and examine a few examples of its current expression. Cultural artifacts that write the disaster have proliferated in the last sixty years, and so for this reason I can only trace a rough outline of the nuked archive, and my examples are less exhaustive than particular. But even this archival accumulation and our inability to access all of it proves my thesis. If during the first nuclear age, following Derrida, the total and remainderless destruction of the archive represented the disastrous asymptotic limit of global nuclear war, the second nuclear age's eschatological limit, both in reality and literature, can be defined by the threat posed by the bomb *and* the archive. The archival imagination of the second nuclear age not only understands the archive as system with the capability of destroying itself, a haunting possibility that would have far reaching and disastrous effects upon the world,

but we can now perceive that archival *accumulation*, the underlying logic of the contemporary archival impulse to collect, store, and document everything, has the potential to be eschatologically threatening.

5.2 TALES OF ARCHIVAL CRISIS IN THE FIRST NUCLEAR AGE

Though the representation of archival destruction has an obviously rich literary tradition, and Paul K. Saint-Amour has demonstrated the presence of the nuclear referent in texts written before 1945,⁷⁰² three notable early Cold War novels—George R. Stewart’s *Earth Abides* (1949), Walter M. Miller Jr.’s *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959), and Nevil Shute’s *On the Beach* (1957)—readily suggest themselves as points of departure. These novels are particularly representative of the early nuclear imagination, having long been understood as important manifestations of Cold War nuclear anxieties. Further, they are exemplary sketches of three distinct and important archival limits. These limits provide a structure to what we can (retroactively) see as aspects of the first nuclear age’s relationship to the archive.

Though the apocalypse it imagines is epidemiological rather than nuclear, it is impossible to read Stewart’s *Earth Abides* without a sense of the historical fallout from the bombing of Hiroshima, which occurred only four years previous to the novel’s publication. *Earth Abides* tells the story of a small group of survivors on the West Coast of the United States. One of the central threads of the novel follows Ish, the protagonist, and his urge to save an old library from destruction. When his son Joey shows a similar interest in knowledge, Ish begins taking him to the library. Joey’s tragic death ultimately ends Ish’s desire to protect the library, it falls into ruin, and the novel ends in a future where the species is unable to read its own past. The archive may

exist in some form at this particular limit of the eschatological archive, but it is illegible in Stewart's speculation.

Shute's *On the Beach* similarly ends with the archive's preservation (though this occurs tangentially). In the wake of a global nuclear war, extreme enough to poison the entire planet with radiation but not extreme enough to destroy *everything* (e.g. there is a moving scene in which the characters encounter a preserved yet irradiated Seattle), the novel narrates a humanity awaiting its inevitable end. Here the archive is preserved but there is no one around to read it.

Miller, in *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, traces a slightly different path. Set in a monastery in a post-apocalyptic Southwestern United States, the first part of the novel concerns a scribe's effort to preserve and illuminate a pre-nuclear manuscript. This manuscript, the "blessed documents"⁷⁰³ whose illumination is of great importance to Brother Francis, ironically turns out to be nothing more than mundane blueprints. This realization and the action of the rest of the novel emphasize the archive as a site of misreading, stressing that a hermeneutics of the archive, particularly a post-nuclear archive, will necessarily involve immoral misinterpretation.⁷⁰⁴

These three limits roughly encapsulate the boundaries of the archival imagination produced by the projection of nuclear war as it was expressed during the first nuclear age. In the speculated wake of MAD there will either be no one around to read the archive, literacy will be lost, or else the past will be quite difficult to decipher. And in a sense, these limits are not unique in the historical literary imagination.⁷⁰⁵ For, as in earlier texts like Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Earth's Holocaust" (1844) or William Carlos Williams's *Spring and All*, in each of these scenarios, something *remains*. Historian Carolyn Steedman usefully calls this remainder "dust": "[Dust] is not about rubbish, nor about the discarded; it is not about a surplus, left over from something else: *it is not about Waste*. Indeed, Dust is the opposite thing to Waste, or at least, the

opposite principle of Waste. It is about circularity, the impossibility of things disappearing, or going away, or being gone. Nothing *can be* destroyed.”⁷⁰⁶ The archive in each novel is not totally destroyed but remains in some form or another after the narrative has ended as *dust*.

Obviously then, there is a fourth limit that is clearly absent here: Derrida’s total and remainderless destruction of the archive. If the nuclear referent for the first time provides the specter of total bibliocaust, we must realize simultaneously that the success of projecting such an abyssal proposition through mimesis is doomed.⁷⁰⁷ For there to be anything constructed or expressed in the face of archival destruction of this magnitude, even some irradiated dust must remain, something to ground, however shakily, the act of representation. As literary critic James Berger in his compelling study of twentieth century post-apocalyptic narrative and discourse suggests, “in nearly every apocalyptic presentation, something remains *after the end*,”⁷⁰⁸ and indeed, there is “a pervasive post-apocalyptic sensibility in recent American culture. It seems significant that in the late twentieth century we have had the opportunity [. . .] to see after the end of our civilization—to see in a strange prospective retrospect what the end would actually look like: it would look like a Nazi death camp, or an atomic explosion, or an ecological or urban wasteland.”⁷⁰⁹ And a great deal of modern and postmodern cultural production, perhaps nowhere more evident than in twentieth century nuclear narratives, has expanded our perspective on this post-apocalyptic present.

The nuclear archives of Stewart, Shute, and Miller are born from the trauma of a post-apocalyptic archive fever: a desire to preserve the present after the end coupled with a despair that one could never hope to read, interpret, or decipher the post-nuclear archive. To put it broadly, projecting archives of disaster fundamentally shaped our conception of archives of all kinds during the first nuclear age, and we quite quickly imagined archival processes as defense

mechanisms against future devastation. The nuclear bomb also provided the archive with a definite *telos*, a reason for existing that it previously lacked in such stark terms. The *intentional* archive as imagined in Arthur C. Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama* (1973), and Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle's *The Mote in God's Eye* (1974), for example, becomes an archive whose explicit goal is to preserve aspects of civilization in the wake of its collapse. Archives have always been about preservation, about cataloging and organizing past documents for future users, but the archive's *raison d'être* was historical, progressive, self-justifying, and tautological (i.e. preserving the past for future historians was unquestionably important; the archive should be preserved because the archive should be preserved). In the nuclear imagination the archive becomes a site that anticipates its own remainderless destruction and often plans for it.⁷¹⁰

Nuclear archives, whether real or fictional, produce a kind of dust *avant la lettre*. With this in mind I think it is appropriate to modify slightly Walter Benjamin's famous dictum to describe such an archive: "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of [future] barbarism."⁷¹¹ The power over the nuclear archive is not only over history and the present, but over "post-history," an imagined future whose only tie to the past is through the post-nuclear archive. Quite simply, how we imagine this type of future directly shapes the archival constructions of the present. Both conservative and progressive senses of history are complicated in this post-nuclear archive while in no way diminishing it as a site of power and knowledge, a system whose critical evaluation is then obviously paramount. Consequently, one of the goals of a revitalized nuclear criticism should be to realize that one of the central debates during its brief vogue in the late-1980s to the early-1990s, the disagreements about the "real" versus the "textual" nature of nuclear war, should be reframed. The first nuclear age, which came to a close with the end of the Cold War, can now be characterized by this complex interplay

between history, the archive, and speculative destruction, a temporality produced by the specter of global thermonuclear war that was, as Derrida puts it, “a phenomenon whose essential feature is that it is *fabulously textual*, through and through,”⁷¹² and quite real in the sense that MAD failed to occur alongside, and in a certain sense because of, the nuclear archival imagination of this period. By imagining the various limits of archival destruction, the limit beyond which such destruction could not pass, the total and remainderless destruction of the archive has remained unrealized. Stewart, Shute, and Miller, by projecting their various archival limits into the future, by letting post-nuclear dust drift from the future into the present, can now be read as inscribing the *non-event* of global nuclear war into the past. In other words, the hindsight provided by the second nuclear age is one in which MAD has moved into the archive of the past; nuclear apocalypse has become historical even though it failed to occur. Consequently, one of the many tasks given to nuclear critics of the second nuclear age should be to endeavor to understand the post-nuclear dust that remains, the archival inscriptions of nuclear war that continue to inflect and inform the textuality and reality of contemporaneity, disaster, and the world risk society.

5.3 TALES OF ARCHIVAL CRISIS IN THE SECOND NUCLEAR AGE

In the remainder of this coda I will focus on three recent works of fiction that I believe nicely capture and complicate the archival imagination of the present: David Mamet’s *Wilson: A Consideration of the Sources* (2000), Neal Stephenson’s *Anathem* (2008), and Charles Stross’s novella-length, “Palimpsest” (2009). These three texts all demonstrate that the technological fantasy of the twentieth century, nuclear annihilation, in certain ways has been transmogrified into an informational sublime—an encounter with a massive amount of information that cannot

ever be accessed in its entirety, let alone understood. Each novel explicitly posits the archive in relationship to disaster, but in a much more complicated sense than, say, artificial intelligence getting out of control. Rather, these fictions all realize that in the second nuclear age archives trace complex relationships to history, temporality, and politics that cannot be easily mapped along an eschatological, linear trajectory. Nonetheless, the archive in each text remains a site of crisis in terms of archival destruction, of anticipating or reacting to nuclear war, and as an agent of disaster, clearly displaying a relationship with the tradition of archival crisis during the first nuclear age as explored in Stewart, Shute, and Miller, while considerably reconfiguring the temporality of archival crisis. The singular and dramatic narrative event of global nuclear war, even if present at some moment in the texts' narrative history, in each of these texts is *dispersed*, both spatially and temporally. The threats Mamet, Stephenson, and Stross imagine for their archives are no longer singular, causing "irreversible destruction, leaving no traces,"⁷¹³ but have fluidly multiplied in archives that are themselves multiple, fluid, rhizomatic, and nonlinear. The singular destruction that marked the tale of archival crisis during the first nuclear age disperses throughout these texts' archives to the point that multiplicitous crisis becomes a fundamental principle of the archives' construction of themselves.

Though *Wilson*, a highly idiosyncratic novel for David Mamet,⁷¹⁴ is a fragmentary, experimental pastiche of text supposedly recovered hundreds of years after the Internet's destruction, it functions as an exemplary transitional text of the tale of archival crisis as it moves into the second nuclear age. *Wilson* is presented as a critical edition of an important historical text, with all the attendant scholarly notes, emendations, and commentary one would expect from such a volume. Mamet, however, is clearly parodying this mode of textual production and preservation, calling attention to the absurdity of post-archival work, the vacuity of present forms

of scholarship, and the relative fragility of the institutions of twentieth century literary and cultural production.⁷¹⁵ Further, the speculative future it imagines is eerily similar to the one projected by Lieberman's PCNAA; the destruction of the Internet in *Wilson* leads to the collapse of civilization in a fashion hardly distinguishable from narratives of nuclear annihilation.

The novel constantly calls attention to its own act of narrating and its mode of critical analysis while simultaneously obscuring most of the relevant information necessary to understand its narrative scope. For instance, there is nothing explicit in the text of *Wilson* that informs us what purpose the fragments we have chaotically gathered in front of us serve, nor where they come from. One has to read the back cover of the book for this information: "When the Internet—and the collective memory of the twenty-first century—crashes, the past is reassembled from the downloaded memories of Ginger, wife of ex-President Wilson."⁷¹⁶ The novel attempts and dramatically fails to represent the "'Time of the Destruction of All Knowledge.'"⁷¹⁷ The late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in *Wilson* become a fairly brief and unrecorded period of human history: "For, dating [. . .] the Crash of the Internet in 2021, we have had a period of eighty [. . .] years of the reign of that commodity understood as 'information,' we have a scant nineteen years, the 'time of the Troubles,' before the Revelation, and the Riots."⁷¹⁸ The irony should be clear: for an age that worshipped the commodity of information, *Wilson*'s narrator/scholar has surprisingly little information from this period.

Wilson shares with the earlier nuclear texts I discussed above a sense of archival dust's persistence even in a world where the Internet has accidentally deleted itself for an absurd reason (a kind of *Dr. Strangelove* [1964] for the information age). Its wide use of fragmentation and historical distortion repeatedly emphasize the futility of archival reconstruction and the mimetic and hermeneutic challenges of narrating (a post-infocast) history. At once hypertextual and

retro-modernist, the result of the word processor and a post-Cold War literature of exhaustion, the novel materially enacts its own metafictional reconstruction of history in the wake of archival disaster.

That it does this without a nuclear explosion should be emphasized. A major difference between Mamet's novel and, say, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, perhaps even more than the formal differences, is the apparent absence of the nuclear referent. Yet even so, the nuclear persists as an *instantaneous* technological disaster with wide-reaching global consequences here, much as instantaneous disaster remains a common feature of contemporary ecological disaster narratives (e.g., the films of Roland Emmerich, which depend upon instantaneous disaster for their narrative tension). The anxiety Mamet highlights, then, is the reverse of what it appears to be. Rather than worry about what might be lost or destroyed (indeed the novel contains a preface with the clear, if disingenuous acknowledgment that "*all knowledge, of course, was not lost*"⁷¹⁹), *Wilson* paints in broad strokes the anxiety accompanying archival accumulation. Everywhere pointing to the absurdities of postmodern media-culture, contemporary archive fever, and the jargon filled minutiae of historical and literary scholarship, the novel ultimately asks not only how future historians will begin to engage with a period during which so much, perhaps too much, was saved (i.e., how does one begin to choose what to study?), but how this very approach to something like the asymptotic limit of "total knowledge" leads toward disaster. The urge to preserve the documents of the past in the face of an uncertain though eschatological nuclear future transforms into the very thing threatening that future. *Wilson* understands the present's hyper-connectivity and its encyclopedic drive as absurd, dangerous, and inevitably disastrous as the totality of this information amounts to nothing short of an absence of information.

Neal Stephenson's *Anathem* shares *Wilson*'s sense of inevitable destruction if not its formal experimentation. Following four doorstops of encyclopedic historical fiction from Stephenson, the equally voluminous *Anathem* is set in an alternate universe on the planet Arbre in the far future, but it is understood that this world's history very much mirrors the history of our own. Arbre's most distinct feature is that throughout the world are large monasteries called concents. These concents were originally established after the end of the "Praxic Age" (when theory and practice were partners), an epoch that very much resembles our own present, at which point some global nuclear catastrophe occurred. After the destruction of civilization people decided to establish these concents for two reasons: to preserve both knowledge and the academic environment in which to pursue philosophy, math, and science unimpeded, and to organize these concents in such a manner that they would not be jeopardized by the vicissitudes of—nor would they affect—the outside world. By establishing strict rules regarding the technological advancement allowed to the monastic secular intellectuals inhabiting these concents, while severely restricting communication with the Praxic world, these monastery-archives were established to ensure that no matter what was happening outside, or "extramuros," they could preserve a degree of stability and continuity inside the archive itself while simultaneously restricting the knowledge and learning thought to have caused the ancient "Terrible Events" from practical application in the world. In other words, these archives are an attempt to de-realize the remainderless archival destruction of total nuclear war through both the preservation and segregation of the knowledge contained in the archive. Further, each concent contains multiple barriers between different areas of the archive, called "maths," and these barriers are rigidly defined while being spatially porous at certain sanctioned times. Each section or math of each concent is divided by a wall with a gate that opens every one, ten, hundred, or

thousand years to communicate extramuros, the idea being that each successive level of the concent is more purely devoted to theory-as-such by being further removed from the outside world and the practical application of the knowledge stored in the archive.

Anathem's archive is thus located at a complex spatial and temporal frontier. Rather than residing in a deserted post-apocalyptic wasteland, as in *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, it is simultaneously at the center of the world and wholly outside of it. Likewise, for the avouts residing in the maths, the outside world constitutes a similar frontier, simultaneously outside their possible experience while limning their temporal and spatial existence inside, depending upon which section of the concent the avouts reside in. This radically shifts the "normative" post-apocalyptic narrative's representation of space as a liminal frontier (e.g., *Mad Max* [1979] or Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* [2006]). Rather than presenting post-apocalyptic space as simply something outside, distant, foreign, or other, something that the nuclear introduces through its transgressive destruction, in *Anathem* it also constitutes a center, ground, foundation, and core. Furthermore, rather than present contemporary civilization's collapse as temporally bounded, as eschatological or teleological, the civilization outside of *Anathem*'s concents, "[d]uring some eras [. . .] would grow and engulf our walls, and office workers in skyscrapers would gaze down on the tops of our bastions. At other times it would ebb and recede to a tiny fueling-station or gun emplacement at the river crossing"⁷²⁰; or as Erasmus—the protagonist of the novel—notes regarding the concent's honey production: "[w]hen there was an economy extramuros, we could sell the honey to burgers in the market stall before the Day Gate, and use the money to buy things that were difficult to make inside the concent. When conditions outside were post-apocalyptic, we could eat it."⁷²¹ These moments, along with much of the rest of the novel, display a concrete awareness that complex and inextricable relationships between

technologies of information and destruction are further complicated and, in a way, reversed from traditional archival modes. The archive in *Anathem* becomes temporally teleological, and it is disaster that becomes a site of constant change, reversal, cyclicity, difference, and repetition. Indeed, in his off-handed observation of the inconsequentiality of whether the outside world was post-apocalyptic or not, Erasmus takes this archival reversal as a given.

As Erasmus's narrative moves forward it is revealed that a starship orbiting the planet contains humans from a different though parallel universe who have found a way to enter Arbre. Stephenson justifies the multiple universes within *Anathem* not only in terms of physics, but in terms of narrative. Each universe, or "worldtrack," has seen different historical narratives play out based on choices individuals have made, as well as attempts to violate the causal, linear nature of time itself: "This is how the universe protects herself—prevents violations of causality. If you attempt to do anything that would give you the power of violating the laws of cause-and-effect—to go back in time and kill your grandfather," one finds themselves "in a different and separate causal domain? How extraordinary! [. . .] One is shunted into an altogether different narrative [. . .] and thus causality is preserved."⁷²² In *Anathem*, not only notions of temporal and spatial liminality are upset by the crises of archivization—the relationship between the rise and fall of civilization and the archive's approach to knowledge preservation—like the fragmented, unreliable, and fabricated text of *Wilson*, narrative itself is subject to archival crisis. The archive in *Anathem* is able to project a world, and that ability is multiplied infinitely in Stephenson's invocation of alternate universes, conceiving space-time like some kind of hyper-Borgesian library. The universes of *Anathem*'s possible narratives are archives themselves, entries into the infinite, total set of all possible universes. In this way, this archive repeats, in a kind of vicious circle, its own grounding in the archival crises everywhere punctuating the novel.

Situating the archive within a fluid, multiplicitous, synchronic, and recursive temporality is even more explicitly imagined in Charles Stross's "Palimpsest," which grounds itself in the understanding that, without major leaps in technology, leaps that appear at this point to be all but magic, humanity's future is indeed quite finite. As the short story repeatedly emphasizes, the universe cannot even indefinitely support itself. One can try to extend human existence as far and as long as the universe allows, but the extinction of humanity is inevitable no matter the extent of human technological prowess. The powers that be in the world of "Palimpsest," an organization known as Stasis, have one goal: to combat humanity's extinction for as long as it can. Having achieved the ability to send bodies and information forward and backward through time, Stasis seeds and reseeds the universe with humans over trillions of years. The limits of "Palimpsest"'s narrative correspond to the limits of the universe as such, much in the cosmic tradition of H.G. Wells or Olaf Stapledon.

Perched at the edge of a small crunch—in "Fimbulwinter: the winter at the end of the world, after the last fuel for the necrosun's accretion disk had been consumed, leaving Earth adrift in orbit around a cold black hole, billions of light-years from anything else"⁷²³—is an archive, "The Library at the End of Time,"⁷²⁴ in which all of recorded human history resides. To accomplish their at times brutally preservationist goal, Stasis has constructed this immeasurably vast hyperarchive⁷²⁵ to gather together all the data from the "fully ninety-six percent of humanity [that] lives in eras where the ubiquitous surveillance or personal life-logging technologies have made the recording of absolute history possible."⁷²⁶ Collected during the collapse of whatever civilization produced it, the information is then sent forward to the archive, sent from a humanity who number "nearly twenty billion billion of us. We are not merely legion—we rival in our numbers the stars of the observable universe in the current epoch."⁷²⁷ The Library then

reconfigures and re-communicates the relevant information it contains to important points in the past, its teleological goal being to extend and preserve all historical timelines or “worldtracks” in which it exists. Archival preservation creates the history of archival preservation. This *ur*-library is not only a representation and agent of history, in a sense, it *is* history.

“Palimpsest” turns on the realization that the only way humanity could extend itself is temporally rather than spatially. The stars are too far to reach, the Kurzweilian fever of artificially extended posthuman life is not necessarily a desirable goal, and aliens, whether they exist or not, cannot reach us. The only hope for the survival of the species is through time, through the careful preservation, re-inscription, and reinterpretation of the archive so that it can communicate with the past and reconstruct a more desirable history. As such, any distinction between archival processes and history breaks down. The protagonist, Pierce, is a member of a select group of temporal policeman, known as *librarians*, who “are the eternal guardians of historicity, the arbiters of what really happened [. . .] sworn to serve our great cause—the total history of the human species.”⁷²⁸ This total history is, however, multiple. As is so often the case in time travel narratives, temporal paradoxes proliferate in Stross’s world in the form of alternate timelines, but it is the librarian’s job to shore up these paradoxes, to remove the moments of “palimpsest” when history threatens to become “an entire talmud of rewrites and commentaries [. . .] in a threatening tsunami of unhistory.”⁷²⁹ Consequently, “not only does the Library document all of recorded human history—and there is a *lot* of it [. . .]—it documents all the possible routes through history that end in the creation of the Final Library.”⁷³⁰ This Library is a kind of vast mystic writing pad; ninety-percent of it records events that did not actually “happen” and yet the entirety of the histories and “unhistories” it contains constitute the library’s own meta-narrative. The hyperarchival processes of this Library gather together everything, even the many alternate

histories—ultimately, *fictions*—that did not transpire, and yet nonetheless all of it directly shapes the Library’s writing of (its own) *ur*-history.

Taken together, these three highly speculative fictions repeatedly demonstrate the systemic complexities available to the contemporary archival and eschatological imagination. Unlike *Earth Abides*, *On the Beach*, and *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, the archives of Mamet, Stephenson, and Stross are multiple and rhizomatic, fluidly situated in both space and time, and communicate history synchronically through multiple narrative modes that, though acknowledging various senses of an ending, articulate an eschatology that is quite different than either the utter destruction of the species through nuclear war or the complete deletion of the archive. Just as Stewart, Shute, and Miller rigorously channeled their speculations from the dominant anxieties and fantasies of the Cold War, *Wilson*, *Anathem*, and “Palimpsest” (like Lieberman’s PCNAA), clearly emerge from the complex anxieties attending the global digital information culture. Rather than worry over the disappearance or destruction of information, each text, in its own way, frets about archival accumulation. Whether it is conceived as a tool to stave off the end of the world, or a system whose inevitable trajectory leads to destruction, the archive in each narrative is situated as a site of multiple and complex spatiotemporal crisis.

These tales of archival crisis dramatize and capture the relationship between today’s increasingly totalizing and ubiquitous archival technologies, and the imaginative legacy of nuclear mass-destruction. The archive in each text is always already a site of crisis, not having to await some global nuclear conflagration that would introduce a crisis into the text’s narrative sweep. Further, it should be noted that “crisis” is derived from the Ancient Greek word *krisis*, meaning “decision,” and its root verb *krinein*, meaning “to decide.” (The Greek *krisis* could also mean “judgment” and “separation.”) Drawing upon this etymology, these contemporary tales of

archival crisis present moments of conflict not merely as windows onto material scenes of intense difficulty or danger, turning points or peripeteia; archival crises instead require some kind of decision, and this decision is an archival decision. To put it another way, we might look at the tale of archival crisis in terms of material emergence—i.e. a mass of chaotic material organizing into a higher level of order seemingly spontaneously in order to respond to the crisis. In this fashion, each of these twenty-first century tales of archival crisis should be understood as engaging (hyperbolically) with how digital archival systems write and rewrite themselves, creating social and technological nodes that respond to and dictate history. Each text attributes certain properties to the archive in which different historical, political, and discursive forces emerge, often in the absence of human intervention. Consequently, not only can apocalyptic levels of destruction emerge from the hypothetical archives imagined in these texts, but so can another fantasmatic limit: the creation of a world.

5.4 CONCLUSION: THE ARCHIVE TO COME, OR, THE TASK(S) OF NUCLEAR CRITICISM AT THE PRESENT TIME

In light of the emergence of these tales of archival crisis of the second nuclear age, it should now be clear that a post-Cold War nuclear critical practice would greatly benefit from returning to a moment from Derrida in which he should be read as slightly revising his earlier hypothesis of the total and remainderless destruction of the archive. In a talk given prior to a discussion with book historian Roger Chartier and philosopher Bernard Stiegler in 1997, Derrida proposed another archival limit and hypothesis that deserves to be quoted at length (again):

Now what is happening today [. . .] of the book's to-come, still as the book, is *on the one hand*, beyond the closure of the book, the disruption, the dislocation, the disjunction, the dissemination with no possible gathering, the irreversible dispersion of this total codex [. . .]; but simultaneously, *on the other hand*, a constant reinvestment in the book project, in the book of the world or the world book, in the absolute book. [. . .] It re-creates the temptation that is figured by the World Wide Web as the ubiquitous Book finally reconstituted, the book of God, the great book of Nature, or the World Book finally achieved in its onto-theological dream, even though what it does is repeat the end of the book as to-come.

There are two fantasmatic limits of the book to come, two extreme, final, eschatic figures of the end of the book, the end as death, or the end as *telos* or achievement. We must take seriously these two fantasies; what's more they are what makes [*sic*] writing and reading happen. [. . .] But we should also perhaps wake up to the necessity that goes along with these fantasies.⁷³¹

The necessity that goes along with these fantasies, which Derrida develops as four interminable "vanishing points," is what the post-Cold War nuclear archive gives to thought: the archiving of the world, the hypothesis of a total and remainderless documentation or creation of a world. If the first nuclear age, according to Derrida, introduced total archival destruction to thought, the second nuclear age has given it (or made it remember) total archival creation. And these are equally threatening. "The truth of the book, if I may put it like that, at any rate its *necessity*, resists—and dictates to us (this is also the seriousness of a 'must') that we should resist both these fantasies, which are only the flipside of each other."⁷³² As he once suggested that "[t]he

hypothesis of this total destruction watches over deconstruction,”⁷³³ today the hypothesis of total capture must watch over a revived nuclear criticism.

Regardless of their obvious differences, Mamet, Stross, and Stephenson’s texts are born out of and respond to the ubiquitous archival surveillance of the present age, the urge—as Microsoft’s *MyLifeBits* project⁷³⁴ and the basic logic of Google demonstrate—to capture, record, document, and store *everything*. Obviously this is a fantasmatic limit, but it is a fantasy we should take seriously. We must be aware of the relative inhumanity that drives and results from the hyperarchival impulse. As Alexander Galloway and philosopher Eugene Thacker convincingly argue, when we start exploring network science and its relationship to archival processes, something emerges which “is that of *network being*, a *Dasein* specific to network phenomena.”⁷³⁵ Today, as Lieberman’s PCNAA limply gestures toward, yesterday’s archives have grown out of our control to understand, map, or destroy them. Like the force Henry Adams symbolized with the dynamo, and most assuredly the cultural effects created by perceptions of the nuclear bomb, the archive both is, and should be considered a symbol for, a material and historical force, one with great creative as well as destructive potential.

In this fashion, we would do well to read the fate of the nuclear referent after the Cold War as a *dispersal* rather than a disappearance. One could argue that the US cultural sense of an ending, its ability to imagine itself at the brink of some disaster, actually increased and diversified during the 1990s and 2000s.⁷³⁶ The sheer proliferation of apocalyptic fantasies in the popular imagination, whether they imagine ecological, religious, viral, natural, or technological disaster, combined with how many disasters have really occurred, often instantly communicated around the globe, can be existentially overwhelming if dwelt upon for too long. To circle back to the beginning, recall Jameson: “Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the

world than to imagine the end of capitalism. We can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world.”⁷³⁷

Along with this contemporary archive of disaster, we should also emphasize the hyperarchival nature of emerging texts themselves. With the increasing space made available by improvements in information technology, texts are now being created that are simply massive, unthinkably large in terms of most recording technologies’ capacity during the twentieth century. Take, for example, Richard Grossman’s forthcoming *Breeze Avenue* (2014), a three-million page mega-text, that according to Grossman’s website will “[manifest] itself most significantly as a set of 5,000 volumes, each containing 600 pages that are installed in a reading room. Although available in digital formats, in its massive printed version it stands as a bulwark against predigested and inane communication and as symbol and dirge for the global extinction of culture now in progress.”⁷³⁸ The term “encyclopedic” does no justice to the size of such a text, which will be installed literally as an archive. The contemporary mega-text, and the mega-narratives now proliferating, both in video games and more “traditional” cultural forms like television and the novel,⁷³⁹ materialize one limit of Derrida’s absolute-book-to-come through their sheer unreadable size, while also constantly drawing attention to their own archive fever, their own (futile) resistance to decay, destruction, disappearance, and rewriting.

So we should ask, given the atmosphere of this global network of doom, both real and imagined, what role should nuclear criticism play going forward? To imagine the task of nuclear criticism at the present time we should begin by remembering that in certain ways it perhaps became unnecessary in the immediate wake of the Cold War. Whether this statement is read as overly modest or hubristically grandiose, certain real effects have been achieved by the continued critique of nuclear power, not the least of which is the simple fact that there has been

no nuclear war since Hiroshima. The nuclear critic is now in the strange position in which her object of study has seemed to disappear and this is something to be celebrated. And yet the global imaginary churns out post-apocalyptic images on a daily basis. As some have convincingly suggested, perhaps a risk criticism or a disaster criticism would be a more appropriate endeavor than nuclear criticism at the moment. To my mind, however, it is the nuclear that continues to define the background of the contemporary eschatological imagination, remaining in a variety of forms as a kind of nuclear dust. The sense of an ending that the thermonuclear bomb introduced to the species (and the archive) has become multiple (revealing in hindsight that it always was). From ecological, economic, and epidemiological catastrophes, to the emerging informational, networked, and posthuman eschatologies, the nuclear bomb's continued and diverse representation and expression across a range of media is frankly staggering, disturbing, and fascinating. This alone should continue to pose a rich and vital task for the continued practice of nuclear criticism.

Further, there is a marked anxiety in literature, criticism, publishing, and the university over the effects of increased digital archivization, an anxiety which ranges from fears about the death of print, the end of libraries, and the foreclosure of the humanities, to fears that extend to the posthuman extinction (or transformation) of the species. These anxieties reveal that, even if overtly specific representations of nuclear war have largely disappeared from the US imaginary, there remains a marked dialectical and structural tension between the representation of technologies of destruction and accumulation, between information and nuclear technologies, between crisis and possibility. Revisiting nuclear criticism, especially as I have framed it here, can enhance the methods and perspectives from which critics can continue the very necessary task of accounting for cultural production in the information age, a criticism that is capable of

rigorously attending to the materiality of texts, the technologies through which information flows, accumulates, and disappears, and the networked, distributed nature of the contemporary apocalyptic imagination. Even more so, nuclear criticism may ultimately prove to offer a mode of confronting our own sense of the textual, disciplinary, and discursive crises that characterize so many aspects of the world today. By revisiting nuclear criticism we might find some quite useful tools to account for the persistent rhetoric of crisis that the network society appears incapable of escaping and radically change the conversation.

NOTES

1.0 MUTUALLY ASSURED DECONSTRUCTION: NUCLEAR CRITICISM AND AMERICAN APOCALYPTICS, PP. 1-53

¹ Don DeLillo, *End Zone* (New York: Penguin, 1986 [1972]), 240.

² Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real! Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (New York: Verso, 2002), 17.

³ Fredric Jameson, “Future City” (2003), in *The Ideologies of Theory* (New York: Verso, 2008), 573. The “someone” that Jameson is talking about here is of course himself, and he is referring to an oft-quoted quip from the introduction to a volume collecting his Wellek Library Lecture, given at the University of California, Irvine in 1991: “It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imaginations. [. . .] I have come to think that the word *postmodern* ought to be reserved for thoughts of this kind” (*The Seeds of Time* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1994], xii, emphasis in original).

⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (New York: Verso, 2009), 92.

⁵ See, for example, Sarah Wheaton’s discussion of the recent etymological history of “snowpocalypse,” a term she finds originally used in 2006, but popularized during the winter storm of 2009, in “Snowpocalypse Now, and Then,” *The New York Times* (19 Dec. 2009), <http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/12/19/snowpocalypse-now-and-then/>.

⁶ Both of these events occurred in the week prior to this writing. On North Korea's nuclear test on 12 February 2013, see Justin McCurry and Tania Branigan, "North Korea Stages Nuclear Test in Defiance of Bans," *The Guardian* (12 Feb. 2013), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/feb/12/north-korea-nuclear-test-earthquake>. On the meteor that disintegrated over Siberia on 15 February 2013, see Ellen Barry and Andrew E. Kramer, "Shock Wave of Fireball Meteor Rattles Siberia, Injuring 1,200," *The New York Times* (15 Feb. 2013), http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/16/world/europe/meteorite-fragments-are-said-to-rain-down-on-siberia.html?_r=1&.

⁷ In using the term "constellation" here I hope to signal my indebtedness to the methodology employed by Jonathan Arac in *Critical Genealogies: Historical Situations for Postmodern Literary Studies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) and elsewhere, who masterfully takes up Walter Benjamin's notion of the constellation to considerable effect. Any ineffective departures from this method, or other conceptual mistakes, however, remain mine alone. As the corpus of nuclear literature is simply too large to hope for anything resembling completeness, I have gathered together what I hope is an interesting constellation of writers that, though they may not immediately suggest themselves as in conversation with one another, I think that gathering them together can challenge our (nuclear) present, and inform the sense of the future I would like to open up that would be *against* apocalypse, a sense of time that would be anti-eschatological. For Benjamin's notion of the "constellation" see the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue" to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1963), trans. John Osborne (New York: Verso, 1998), where he writes: "Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars. This means, in the first place, that they are neither their concepts nor their laws. They do not contribute to the knowledge of phenomena, and in no way can the latter be criteria with which to judge the existence of ideas" (34). Benjamin further developed this notion in letters exchanged with

Theodor W. Adorno. See Adorno and Gretel Karplus to Benjamin, 2-4 August 1935, and Benjamin to Karplus and Adorno, 16 August 1935, in Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940*, trans. Nicholas Walker, ed. Henri Lonitz (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001 [1999]), 106, 119.

⁸ This essay was originally published in the French periodical, *Liberation*, on 29 March 1991, and has been collected with Baudrillard's two previous essays about the first Iraq war, "The Gulf War Will Not Take Place" and "The Gulf War: Is it Really Taking Place?" to make up the volume, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, trans. by Paul Patton (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995).

⁹ Christopher Norris, *Uncritical Theory: Postmodernism, Intellectuals, and the Gulf War* (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 15. It is also curious to note that today's "intellectual fashion" is, at least from my perspective, much less clear, especially given the craze of "digital humanities." I avoid this term because I feel *none* of this project would have been even remotely possible without the "digital," as will hopefully become clear. For a variety of reasons, this dissertation frequently gestures toward journalism and popular culture, among other texts, and especially events that occurred during the period it was written. I believe that to separate the gross symmetry of disaster since 2010 and March 2013 from the writing of the disaster this dissertation undertakes would have been short-sighted, and really just impossible given my subject matter. If my thesis regards nuclear and communications technologies as inseparable, then some of the most clear examples proving the continuing relevance of this type of intervention have occurred recently, and continue to occur with uncanny frequency. If there is one thing I have learned during my writing, it was that I picked a topic that would never fail me. Crisis is simply the mode of contemporaneity. And really, with certain things—*like the US plans*

to nuke the moon (more on this below)—the serendipity was simply too much to resist. This is also why I draw upon actual legislation that has recently appeared. Senator Joseph Lieberman’s Internet “kill switch,” which I address in my coda, is only one example of the state’s recent efforts to control the imaginary and the real. It is my hope that my departures into the contemporary disaster imagination do not distract from my scholarship. Toward this end, I would also refer the reader to *The Hyperarchival Parallax*, <http://bradfest.wordpress.com>. Necessarily less formal in medium and message, my blog could easily be read as a digital companion piece to this dissertation.

¹⁰ See Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2009) and *The Architecture of Aftermath* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2006).

¹¹ And this is not to overly disparage Baudrillard. For a younger scholar encountering him in the wake of 11 September 2001, such texts as *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), *America* (1986), trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 1988), and *The Conspiracy of Art: Manifestos, Interview, Essays*, trans. Ames Hodges, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 2005) were formative.

¹² I think quite tellingly, the question of whether or not we are living in a simulation has moved from being asked within the province of poststructural theory to being asked in the fields of analytic philosophy, computer science, and physics. For the initial formulation of the question about whether we live in a simulation or not in these latter fields see Nick Bostrom, “Are You Living in a Computer Simulation?” *Philosophical Quarterly* 53, no. 211 (2003): 243-55. Bob Yirka recently reported about physicists seriously pursuing this question in, “Is it Real? Physicists Propose Method to Determine if the Universe is a Simulation,” *Phys.org* (12 Oct. 2012), <http://phys.org/news/2012-10-real-physicists-method-universe-simulation.html>. For the

study Yirka discusses, see Silas R. Beane, Zohreh Davoudi, and Martin J. Savage, “Constraints on the Universe as a Numerical Simulation,” *arXiv.org* (4 Oct. 2012), <http://arxiv.org/pdf/1210.1847v2.pdf>. I am also, of course, referencing the film *The Matrix* (1999), directed by siblings Andy and Lana Wachowski, above.

¹³ The original French is “*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*,” which Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak translates as both “*There is nothing outside the text* [and] there is no outside-text” (Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* [1967], Corrected Edition, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak [Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997 (1976)], 158, emphases in original).

¹⁴ Molly Wallace’s “Will the Apocalypse Have Been Now? Literary Criticism in an Age of Global Risk,” in *Criticism, Crisis, and Contemporary Narrative*, ed. Paul Crosthwaite (New York: Routledge, 2011), suggests that we should distinguish between a first and second nuclear age, whose transitional period coincides with the end of the Cold War, roughly 1989-1991. Wallace then goes on to argue, quite convincingly, that we should combine ecological criticism with nuclear criticism, and throw them through a blender of digital humanities, in order to develop something like a risk criticism. I regret tying my wagon so firmly to the nuclear critical wagon before this essay appeared, as I wholly agree with Wallace. So it would not be inappropriate to read “nuclear criticism” for “risk criticism” in a number of places in this dissertation, but as I hope to demonstrate through my reading of David Foster Wallace and Thomas Pynchon, there are further avenues for nuclear criticism to pursue. On the concept of global risk and its relationship to criticism, the other essays in Crosthwaite’s collection are also worthy of attention.

¹⁵ Even if this *is* largely a fable, which I discuss at length in my reading of Thomas Pynchon’s *Inherent Vice* (2009).

¹⁶ Ulrich Beck, *World at Risk* (2007), trans. Ciaran Cronin (Malden, MA: Polity, 2009), 15.

¹⁷ Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality" (1961) in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1983 [1971]), 215.

¹⁸ Ibid., 11, emphasis in original.

¹⁹ Ibid., 10, emphasis in original.

²⁰ For a broad perspective on literary studies and risk theory, see Susan Mizruchi, "Risk Theory and the Contemporary Novel," *American Literary History* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 109-135; Ursula K. Heise, "Toxins, Drugs, and Global Systems: Risk and Narrative in the Contemporary Novel," *American Literature* 74, no. 4 (December 2002): 747-778; Daniel Grausam, "History, Community, Spirituality: Keywords for Rethinking Postmodernism?" *Contemporary Literature*, 51, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 398-411, and especially his interesting nuclear critical take on postmodern American metafiction, which I refer to regularly: *On Endings: American Postmodern Fiction and the Cold War* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2011); and Marc McGurl, "Ordinary Doom: Literary Studies in the Waste Land of the Present," *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 329-349. McGurl's recent book, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), has received considerable and well-deserved attention. The influence of the institution of Creative Writing Programs on post-World War II American fiction has been considerable, and McGurl tells a fascinating and timely history of this institution. For a very productive engagement with McGurl's work, see Adam Kelly, "Beginning with Postmodernism," *Twentieth Century Literature* 57, nos. 3-4 (Fall/Winter 2011): 391-422. It is also important to note that Beck begins his discussion of risk in *World Risk Society* by discussing the origins of the novel:

“In the figure of Don Quixote, human life, whose future no longer bows down before the power of the gods or before God’s wisdom, has become a never-ending adventure. For, in God’s absence, risk unfolds its fateful and terrible, inscrutable ambiguity. The world is not as it is; rather its existence and its future depend on *decisions*, decisions which play off positive and negative aspects against one another, which connect progress and decline and which like all things human, are bearers of error, ignorance, hubris, the promise of control and, ultimately, even the seed of possible self-destruction” (4).

²¹ Beck, 14, emphasis in original.

²² Ibid., 9-10.

²³ Donald E. Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 20.

²⁴ And this is not “only” a result of the relationship between disaster, or perhaps more accurately, *crisis*, late capitalism, and the economic policies of Milton Friedman and the Chicago School of economics that Naomi Klein plots in *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador, 2007).

²⁵ Pease, 16-17.

²⁶ Ibid., 51.

²⁷ As Google CEO Eric Schmidt has said, “There was 5 exabytes of information created between the dawn of civilization through 2003, but that much information is now created every 2 days, and the pace is increasing [. . .] people aren’t ready for the technology revolution that’s going to happen to them” (qtd. in Marshall Kirkpatrick, “Google CEO Schmidt: ‘People Aren’t Ready for the Technology Revolution,” *readwrite* [4 Aug. 2010], http://readwrite.com/2010/08/04/google_ceo_schmidt_people_arent_ready_for_the_tech).

²⁸ On the prevalence of contemporary hyperarchival novels, or what he calls the “big, ambitious novel,” see Mark Greif’s essay, “‘The Death of the Novel’ and Its Afterlives: Toward a History of the ‘Big, Ambitious Novel,’” *boundary 2* 36, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 11-30.

²⁹ Theodor Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society” (1951), trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber Nicholsen, in *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 152.

³⁰ Of all the different ways of referring to the WTC attacks and the events transcribed within the orbit of 11 September 2001, I prefer Terry Smith’s “9.11.01.” In *The Architecture of Aftermath*, he writes: “In a climate of actual and impending war, of insidious misinformation and sudden violence—in a word, of *permanent aftermath*—keeping a broad, critical perspective is crucial. I prefer ‘9.11.01’ as the name for what is really at stake here. The year of occurrence will remain, I believe, of more significance than its anniversary” (14). The years since Smith published these words have, I also believe, proved him correct. He goes on to write that “While I believe that 9.11.01 was, for a number of quite concrete reasons, an important event—particularly within the polity of the United States and the Middle East—it was not the epochal, millennial, apocalyptic Event That Changed The Entire World Forever” (14). This is a perspective I *firmly* share.

³¹ Even *The Christian Science Monitor* concurs with this assessment. See Yvonne Zipp, “Still no Great 9/11 Novel?” *The Christian Science Monitor* (8 Sep. 2011), <http://www.csmonitor.com/Books/chapter-and-verse/2011/0908/Still-no-great-9-11-novel>. D.G. Myers, writing for the staunchly neoconservative publication, *Commentary*, also makes a similar point in his “Complete Annotated Guide to 9/11 Novels,” *Commentary Magazine* (24 Aug. 2011), <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/2011/08/24/911-novels/>. In other words, this is simply to note that,

regardless of their political and ideological leanings, no one has been much impressed with US 9.11.01 novels.

³² I will use this opportunity to note that, among my many other speculations about Thomas Pynchon's forthcoming new novel, *The Bleeding Edge* (forthcoming 2013), I believe that it will probably engage with the 1990s and 2000s, thereby completing the historical trajectory of representing every decade of the twentieth century that he has begun in his other work. I also speculate that perhaps the mid-to-late nineteenth century, particularly the Civil War, might be the setting for *The Bleeding Edge*, and hold out a small (and possibly ridiculous) hope that it will be a science fiction novel. We shall see.

³³ Verso was originally the paperback imprint of New Left Books, a publishing venture launched by *The New Left Review* in 1970. Since that time Verso has become the sole imprint of New Left Books. See Verso's website: <http://www.versobooks.com/pg/about-verso>.

³⁴ The photographic succession begins with Paul Virilio's *Ground Zero*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 2002) as the most wide-angled shot, to Baudrillard's *The Spirit of Terrorism and Other Essays*, New Edition, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 2003), which focuses more closely on the smoke but has people still visible and discernible in the foreground, to Žižek's *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!*, in which no people are discernible at all, and only the gap where the towers stood is visible.

³⁵ I borrow this term from Maurice Blanchot's, *The Writing of the Disaster* (1980), New Edition, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

³⁶ Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!*, 17, emphases in original.

³⁷ Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, 5.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

³⁹ Ibid., 4.

⁴⁰ It must be remembered that the word “apocalypse” comes from the ancient Greek *apokalypsis*, meaning to uncover, disclose, or unveil (precisely why St. John of Patmos’ Apocalypse is also often titled Revelations).

⁴¹ For example, consider Baudrillard thinking about history: “At some point in the 1980s, history took a turn in the opposite direction. Once the apogee of time, the summit of the curve of evolution, the solstice of history had been passed, the downward slope of events began and things began to run in reverse. It seems that, like cosmic space, historical space-time is also curved. By the same chaotic effect in time and space, things go quicker and quicker as they approach their term, just as water mysteriously accelerates as it approaches a waterfall” (*The Illusion of the End* (1992), trans. Chris Turner [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994], 10). Or consider Žižek: “recall the widespread perception of the USA as a new Roman Empire. *The problem with today’s USA is not that it is a new global Empire, but that it is not: in other words, that, while pretending to be, it continues to act as a nation-state, ruthlessly pursuing its own interests*” (*Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* [New York: Verso, 2004], 19, emphases in original).

⁴² See Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, Revised and Expanded Ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970 [1957]).

⁴³ See Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2007).

⁴⁴ As opposed to Miller’s definition, in which the jeremiad or political sermon served to condemn the fact that “the city on a hill as a beacon to mankind, had degenerated into another Sodom,” Bercovitch stresses the optimism in the American jeremiad: “Miller rightly called the New England jeremiad America’s first distinctive literary genre; its distinctiveness, however, lies

not in the vehemence of its complaint but in precisely the reverse. The essence of the sermon form that the first native-born American Puritans inherited from their fathers, and the ‘developed, amplified, and standardized,’ is its unshakeable optimism. In explicit opposition to the traditional mode, it inverts the doctrine of vengeance into a promise of ultimate success, affirming to the world, and despite the world, the inviolability of the colonial cause” (Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* [Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978], 5, 6-7).

⁴⁵ Bercovitch, 92, emphases in original.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 25-6.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 141.

⁴⁸ See Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a New Epilogue*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1966]).

⁴⁹ Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!*, 5-6. It must also be noted that Žižek here is drawing upon Alain Badiou’s notion of the “passion for the Real.” See Alain Badiou, *The Century* (2005), trans. Alberto Toscano (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2007).

⁵⁰ Badiou says quite simply in *The Century* that the twentieth century, “this time, the century is the site of *apocalyptic events*—events so ghastly the only category capable of reckoning with the century’s unity is that of crime” (2, emphases mine).

⁵¹ See Herman Melville, “Bartleby, The Scrivener” (1853), in *Melville’s Short Novels* (Norton Critical Edition), ed. Dan McCall (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2002), 3-34.

⁵² See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 203-204.

⁵³ See Žižek, *Iraq*. His discussion of Bartlebian politics is perhaps most fully articulated, however, in *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 381-385, but it also appears in *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008) and *In Defense of Lost Causes* (New York: Verso, 2008). In terms of my discussion, it is also important that Hardt and Negri do not equate crisis and catastrophe with (a need for) apocalypse: “Imperial society is always and everywhere breaking down, but this does not mean that it is necessarily heading to ruin. Just as the crisis of modernity in our characterization did not point to any imminent or necessary collapse, so too the corruption of Empire *does not indicate any teleology or any end in sight*. In other words, the crisis of modern sovereignty was not temporary or exceptional (as one would refer to the stock market crash of 1929 as a crisis), but rather *the norm of modernity*” (*Empire* 202, emphases mine).

⁵⁴ Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, 148.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 151.

⁵⁶ Evan Calder Williams, *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2011), 9.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 41.

⁵⁸ Kermode writes about the modern sense of crisis, which he locates as originating in St. Paul and St. Augustine: “Thus as we shall see, we think in terms of crisis rather than temporal ends; and make much of subtle disconfirmation and elaborate peripeteia. And we concern ourselves with the conflict between the deterministic pattern any plot suggests, and the freedom of persons within that plot to choose and so to alter the structure, the relations of beginning, middle, and end” (Kermode 30). The work of David Ketterer on the apocalyptic imagination and science fiction compliments Kermode’s work quite nicely. See David Ketterer, *New Worlds for Old: The*

Apocalyptic Imagination, Science Fiction, and American Literature (New York: Anchor Books, 1974).

⁵⁹ Kermode, 8.

⁶⁰ For instance, Mike Moats has, and I think correctly, called 2012 the “year of David Foster Wallace.” See Mike Moats, “Year of David Foster Wallace,” *Fiction Advocate* (20 Dec. 2012), <http://fictionadvocate.com/2012/12/20/yearofdavidfosterwallace2012/>.

⁶¹ John Ashbery, “A Last World,” in *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), in *John Ashbery: Collected Poems 1956-1987*, ed. Mark Ford (New York: The Library of America, 2008), 83-86.

⁶² Joseph Cirincione, “How to Shave a Bundle off the Deficit: Spend Less on Nukes,” *The Atlantic* (13 July 2011), <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2011/07/how-to-shave-a-bundle-off-the-deficit-spend-less-on-nukes/241844/>. Cirincione has also written a book on contemporary nuclear issues, *Bomb Scare: The History and Future of Nuclear Weapons* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

⁶³ Cirincione, “How to Shave a Bundle off the Deficit.”

⁶⁴ See Joseph Cirincione, “Searching for Cuts, Congress Spars Over Nuclear Weapons,” *The Atlantic* (13 Oct. 2011), <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2011/10/searching-for-cuts-congress-spars-over-nuclear-weapons/246626/>.

⁶⁵ Edward J. Markey et al. to Members of the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction (11 Oct. 2011), http://markey.house.gov/docs/2011_1011_freeze_the_nukes_letter_to_super_committee.pdf.

⁶⁶ See Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life” (1874), in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, ed. Daniel Breazeale (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 57-123.

⁶⁷ Jacques Derrida, "On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy" (1984), in *Raising the Tone of Philosophy: Late Essays by Immanuel Kant, Transformative Critique by Jacques Derrida*, trans. John Leavey, Jr., ed. Peter Fenves (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 117-172.

⁶⁸ Jacques Derrida, "No Apocalypse, Not Now: Full Speed Ahead (Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)" (1984), trans. Catherine Porter and Philip Lewis, in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, Vol. 1, eds. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007 [1984]), 387-409.

⁶⁹ Derrida, *Psyche*, 402, emphases mine.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 406. Though the acerbic nature of this remark is quickly diffused when he goes on to say: "things that, no matter how quickly they are reappropriated by the university institution, should be nonetheless, in principle and conceptually, irreducible to the model of the *universitas*" (406).

⁷¹ Nuclear criticism was quite in vogue following the *Diacritics* special issue, as there was a special session of the 1985 meeting of the MLA devoted to it (see Avital Ronell, "Starting From Scratch: Mastermix," *The Socialist Review* 18, no. 2 [April-June 1988]: 73-86). This vogue, however, appears to culminate in 1993, virtually the last appearance of the idea of nuclear criticism as something that can actually be practiced (that is, until very recently). See Ken Ruthven, *Nuclear Criticism* (Melbourne, AU: Melbourne University Press, 1993), the only book-length work on nuclear criticism, though it is only a 97 page primer along the lines of the Routledge *New Critical Idiom* series; and for one of the last significant articles on the subject see Roger Luckhurst, "Nuclear Criticism: Anachronism and Anachorism," *Diacritics* 23, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 89-97. For the most part, studies of the nuclear and literature have abandoned

the idea that they are practicing “nuclear criticism,” and it has more-or-less become a footnote to their work. Daniel Cordle, whose recent book is *States of Suspense: The Nuclear Age, Postmodernism and United States Fiction and Prose* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2008), has written one of the few recent articles *explicitly* on nuclear criticism, really the first since 1993 (see “Cultures of Terror: Nuclear Criticism During and Since the Cold War,” *Literature Compass* 3, no. 6 [Sep., 2006]: 1186-1199). Also see John Gery, *Nuclear Annihilation and Contemporary American Poetry: Ways of Nothingness* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1996), though again, nuclear criticism largely functions here as a historical footnote. It is perhaps easy to say that one of the principle reasons for the disappearance of explicit nuclear criticism around 1993 is due to the collapse of the Soviet Union. The persistence of, if not the exacerbation of nuclear and eco-disaster issues, however, makes its disappearance curious, a disappearance I am here attempting to rectify by returning seriously to its *ur-text*, Derrida’s “No Apocalypse, Not Now.”

⁷² Though the subsequent issue of *Diacritics* approaches introducing the topic of nuclear criticism and the motivations for the conference in a fairly general manner, it is quite likely that the conference was initially occasioned by the conjunction of three events. The first was the appearance of the concept of “nuclear winter,” a term that Cornell Professor Carl Sagan and others coined. See R. P. Turco, O. B. Toon, T. P. Ackerman, J. B. Pollack, and Carl Sagan, “Nuclear Winter: Global Consequences of Multiple Nuclear Explosions,” *Science*, New Series 222, no. 4630 (23 Dec. 1983): 1283-92. Though the concept of extreme and sudden climate change due to a global nuclear war had been discussed at least since 1975 (see John Hampson, “Photochemical War on the Atmosphere,” *Nature* 250, no. 189 [July 19, 1974]: 189-91), its effects were previously thought to be less serious than Sagan *et al* demonstrated, not to mention

that his high-level of public visibility quickly popularized the term “nuclear winter.” The second was the Strategic Defense Initiative (commonly known as “Star Wars”), which Ronald Reagan proposed before Congress on 23 March 1983 during discussions of the defense budget. Though Reagan saw that it would “still be necessary to rely on the specter of retaliation, on mutual threat” to insure “nuclear balance,” the Strategic Defense Initiative called upon the scientific community “to give us the means of *rendering these nuclear weapons impotent and obsolete*” (See Ronald Reagan, “Address to the Nation on National Security,” www.fas.org/spp/starwars/offdocs/rrspch.htm, my emphases). The third was the United States deployment of missiles in Western Europe in December, 1983, which effectively broke off arms control negotiations with the Soviet Union. I would also refer one to the foreign policy debate between Reagan and Vice President Walter Mondale during the 1984 Presidential Campaign, as it concerned nuclear issues almost exclusively. For a transcript of the debate go to: <http://www.debates.org/index.php?page=october-21-1984-debate-transcript>.

⁷³ Richard Klein, “Proposal for a *Diacritics* Colloquium on Nuclear Criticism,” *Diacritics* 14, no. 2, Nuclear Criticism (Summer 1984): 2.

⁷⁴ These subjects of investigation were: “The conjunction of the second millennium with the literally apocalyptic power of the nuclear arsenal”; that “the current arms race has arisen under the conditions of a bilateral conflict between the two superpowers”; “the power of horror, which the nuclear horizon proposes”; “the psychology of arms racers”; that “all forms of nuclear discourse [. . .] obey rhetorical constraints”; “the calculus of negotiations depends on epistemological assumptions and theories of strategy which may well be illuminated by [. . .] critical theory”; “the representation of nuclear war in the media as well as in the literary canon demands to be analyzed ideologically”; and that “critical theory must play a role in analyzing the

mechanisms by which nuclear narratives are constructed and enacted” (Klein, 2-3). Significantly, virtually none of Derrida’s intervention into nuclear criticism can be discerned in Klein’s formulation of possible investigatory sites. This is something Klein himself readdressed six years later, with a definition of nuclear criticism wholly indebted to Derrida: “But if total nuclear war meant the end of the archive, the destruction without a trace of the institutions of collective memory, then what is most absolutely vulnerable in the nuclear age is *the institution of literature*, and everything like literature which, at least since the eighteenth century, utterly depends on the archive’s existence [. . .]. It is that institutional organization and that access, which is most utterly vulnerable in the prospect of total nuclear war; that, at least, *is the hypothesis of Nuclear Criticism*” (Richard Klein, “The Future of Nuclear Criticism,” *Yale French Studies* 77, Reading the Archive: On Texts and Institutions [1990]: 80).

⁷⁵ Klein, “Proposal for a *Diacritics* Colloquium on Nuclear Criticism,” 2

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Derrida, *Psyche*, 393.

⁷⁸ William J Scheick, “Nuclear Criticism: An Introduction,” *Papers on Language & Literature* 26, no. 1 (Winter 1990): 5, emphases mine.

⁷⁹ See J. Fisher Solomon, “Probable Circumstances, Potential Worlds: History, Futurity, and the ‘Nuclear Referent,’” *Papers on Language & Literature* 26, no. 1 (Winter 1990): 60-72; and J. Fisher Solomon, *Discourse and Reference in the Nuclear Age* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988). Other voices in this debate notably included the philosopher Richard Rorty and Christopher Norris, despite the latter’s general defense of Derrida (see *Uncritical Theory*, 11-47; and *Derrida* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987], 162-71).

⁸⁰ This is the same kind of logic surrounding the (in)famous “doomsday argument.” See Nick Bostrom, “The Doomsday Argument is Alive and Kicking,” *Mind* 108, no. 431 (July 1999): 539-50.

⁸¹ Scheick, “Nuclear Criticism,” 5.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 9, emphases mine.

⁸³ On the necessity of a nuclear critical pedagogy, see Daniel L. Zins, “Exploding the Canon: Nuclear Criticism in the English Department,” *Papers in Language and Literature* 26, no. 1 (1990): 13-40. The basic argument of the essay is that the humanities, and the practice of teaching English in general, have virtually ignored the nuclear question to their great detriment, and that, “If we are unwilling to explode the canon and begin reading nuclear texts, we may be increasing the risk that we—along with countless millions of other human beings—will be destroyed” (38).

⁸⁴ Derrida, *Psyche*, 390, emphases in original.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 400.

⁸⁶ Luckhurst, 89.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁸⁸ And Derrida says as much: “The only absolute referent is thus of the scope of an absolute nuclear catastrophe that would irreversibly destroy the entire archive and all symbolic capacity, the very *survivance*, as I call it, at the heart of life” (Derrida, *Psyche*, 403).

⁸⁹ Derrida, *Psyche*, 400-1, emphases mine.

⁹⁰ Jacques Derrida, “The Book to Come,” in *Paper Machine* (2001), trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 15.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, emphases mine.

⁹² Derrida, *Psyche*, 402.

⁹³ Luckhurst, 91.

⁹⁴ See Luckhurst, especially his take on Richard Klein and Paul Brians's nuclear bibliography.

Though Luckhurst is also sure to note that “no doubt [Derrida's statement] was only a strategic and temporary move, one that never *rejects* ‘literal’ nuclear war fictions but would argue that the more indirect the route the more directly might the argument [of nuclear criticism] advance, circle, and return to those texts initially displaced” (91).

⁹⁵ Richard Klein provides an interesting take on the immense scope of what would then constitute a legitimate object of nuclear criticism—basically, the entire archive: “But if total nuclear war meant the end of the archive, the destruction without a trace of the institutions of collective memory, then what is most absolutely vulnerable in the nuclear age is the institution of literature, and everything like literature which, at least since the eighteenth century, utterly depends on the archive's existence. Nuclear Criticism is an attempt to reflect on the peculiar vulnerability of literature in light of the prospect of total nuclear war. The repository of the archive, the institutions of public memory, not only insure the literal preservation of this text or that, fragments of which could of course survive total war. The institution of the archive not only makes possible positive remembering; it also permits systematic forgetting—all the possibilities for wandering, for error and discovery, for allusion and influence, for censorship and its undoing, that arise from the intertextual organization of the archive. That organization of course includes as well all the rhetorical and generic conventions, the protocols of commentary and criticism, canons and resistance to the canon, all the laws of copyright, and principles of authorship, all the technologies of publication and dissemination, all the systems of retrieval, cataloguing, bibliography which have made access to the archive possible, at least since the eighteenth

century” (Klein, “The Future of Nuclear Criticism,” 80). For Klein any part of the archive, archivization, or archival modes is open to nuclear criticism because the archive’s very dissolution is the hypothesis that grounds nuclear criticism itself.

⁹⁶ Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (1906), in *Henry Adams: Novels, Mont Saint Michel, The Education* (New York: The Library of America, 1983), 1173.

⁹⁷ “If science were to go on doubling or quadrupling its complexities every ten years, even mathematics would soon succumb. An average mind had succumbed already in 1850; it could no longer understand the problem in 1900” (Adams 1173). In a very different register, today’s science-prophets, like Ray Kurzweil, have taken Adams’s scientific “Law of Acceleration” (the name of the chapter in which the above appears), and, mixing it through Moore’s Law, have reinterpreted it as a “Law of Accelerating Returns,” pointing the way to some posthuman paradise. See Ray Kurzweil, *The Age of Spiritual Machines: When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence* (New York: Penguin, 2000). The increasing unlikelihood of Kurzweil achieving the immortality he so fervently desires may make it in his interest to return to this moment in Adams.

⁹⁸ Adams, 1172.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 1068.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 1067.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 1172, emphases mine.

¹⁰² “Science itself had been crowded so close to the edge of the abyss that its attempts to escape were as metaphysical as the leap, while an ignorant old man felt no motive for trying to escape, seeing that the only escape possible lay in the form of *vis a tergo* commonly called death” (Adams 1114).

¹⁰³ Adams, 1069.

¹⁰⁴ This has recently been published with an alternate title: see H.G. Wells, *The Last War: A World Set Free* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2001 [1914]).

¹⁰⁵ Wells, 80.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 153.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 101. The utopian order in the novel emerges from the realization that humanity simply *cannot survive* if it 1) uses atomic weaponry ever again, 2) does not organize into a World State, thereby ending war (between sovereign nations) altogether, 3) does not organize society scientifically so that advances in science do not occur at a exponentially higher rate of speed than the advances in collective consciousness, and 4) if it does not use this new power in the most intelligent manner possible (i.e., not bombs).

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 154-5.

¹⁰⁹ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000 [1957]), 45.

¹¹⁰ This is something Frye himself gestures toward near the end of his discussion of ironic comedy as he concludes that ironic comedy pushed to its end moves back toward the mythic, and that this movement can primarily be seen in science fiction: “Even popular literature appears to be slowly shifting its center of gravity from murder stories to science fiction—or at any rate a rapid growth of science fiction is certainly a fact about contemporary popular literature. Science fiction frequently tries to imagine what life would be like on a plane as far above us as we are above savagery; its setting is often of a kind that appears to us as technologically miraculous. It is thus a mode of romance with a strong inherent tendency to myth” (Frye, 49).

¹¹¹ “The *pharmakos* is neither innocent nor guilty. He is innocent in the sense that what happens to him is far greater than anything he has done provokes [. . .]. He is guilty in the sense that he is a member of a guilty society, or living in a world where such injustices are an inescapable part of existence” (Frye 41).

¹¹² “The next step is an ironic comedy addressed to the people who can realize that murderous violence is less an attack on a virtuous society by a malignant individual than a symptom of that society’s own viciousness” (Frye 48).

¹¹³ Kermode, 89

¹¹⁴ Wells, 165.

¹¹⁵ See Jonathan Schell, *The Seventh Decade: The New Shape of Nuclear Danger* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 27.

¹¹⁶ Schell, 20-1, emphases mine.

¹¹⁷ de Man, *Blindness and Insight*, 215.

¹¹⁸ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991), trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 6, emphases in original.

¹¹⁹ “Confirmed: US Planned to Nuke the Moon,” at *RT* (26 Nov. 2012), <http://rt.com/usa/news/us-moon-nuclear-project-631/>, emphases mine.

¹²⁰ This was also stupid: in a recent bit of quite shocking news it was reported that, “according to recently declassified documents made available by the U.S. National Security Archive, the United States had a contingency plan in effect where, in the event that the President went missing or was killed during an attack on the country, the military was instructed to launch an automatic and simultaneous ‘full nuclear response’ against both the Soviet Union and China. And it wasn’t until 1968 that the government under Lyndon Johnson repealed the directive”

(George Dvorsky, “The US Had Plans for a ‘Full Nuclear Response’ Should the President Disappear or Be Killed During an Attack,” at *io9* [13 Dec. 2012], <http://io9.com/5968229/us-had-plans-for-a-full-nuclear-response-should-the-president-disappear-or-be-killed-during-an-attack>).

¹²¹ See Jonathan Franzen, “Farther Away” (2011), in *Farther Away* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 15-52.

¹²² See David Foster Wallace, “Keynote Commencement Address,” 21 May 2005. A transcription can be found here: http://web.archive.org/web/20080213082423/http://www.marginalia.org/dfw_kenyon_commencement.html.

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¹²³ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude; or, Growth of a Poet’s Mind* (1850), in *Selected Poetry of William Wordsworth*, ed. Mark Van Doren (New York: The Modern Library, 2002), 261, Book Sixth, ll. 634-640.

¹²⁴ William Carlos Williams, “An Essay on *Leaves of Grass*,” in *Leaves of Grass: One Hundred Years After*, ed. Milton Hindus (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1955), 30.

¹²⁵ Consequently, anything that follows owes a great deal to a number of eminent studies that significantly discuss various literary apocalypses. Principal among these are Frank Kermode’s *Sense of an Ending*, M.H. Abram’s *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1971), and Northrop Frye’s *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947) and *Anatomy of Criticism*. I am of the mind that it is not accidental that

these critics discuss, respectively, narrative structure, the romantic imagination, and archetypal modes in order to revolve around an apocalypse that, as a term in at least Abrams and Frye's work, bears very little resemblance to the nuclear eschatology of the 1940s-1970s. This is also to note that other supernatural apocalyptic traditions are archives beyond my current reach.

¹²⁶ Part of this may very well be because of the anxieties surrounding our inability to “experience” death, to have any sense of what lies beyond. The thinking of a number of SF writers, among them Kim Stanley Robinson and Charles Stross (whom I discuss in the epilogue), have been nicely conceiving the species’ “experience” of extinction, at least in terms of our current understanding about the lifespan of the sun, the speed of light, and the future of the universe as similarly, inaccessibly finite. See in particular Robinson’s *Mars Trilogy* (New York: Bantam, 1993-1996) and its sequel, *2312* (New York: Orbit, 2012). Robinson also addresses what might be called the “postnatural” in “Earth: Under Repair, Forever,” *On Earth: A Survival Guide to the Planet* (3 Dec. 2012), <http://www.onearth.org/article/under-repair-forever>. For different approaches to the species’ finitude, also see Craig Childs, *Apocalyptic Planet: Field Guide to the Everending Earth* (New York: Pantheon, 2012) and Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

¹²⁷ And really, to suggest that one can understand the national fantasy of global nuclear war without noting the presence of St. John of Patmos or the continuing power his Apocalypse plays in contemporary neo-evangelical conceptions of time and history, let alone the coincidence of that apocalyptic narrative with certain strains of American neoliberalism—such a formulation would be absurd.

¹²⁸ Among a great many books, I owe particular debt to James Berger’s *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999);

the collection edited by Richard Dellamora, *Postmodern Apocalypse: The Theory and Cultural Practice at the End* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995); Lee Quinby's *Anti-Apocalypse: Exercises in Genealogical Criticism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); the collection edited by Malcolm Bull, *Apocalypse Theory and the Ends of the World* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995); and Robert Fuller's *Naming the Antichrist: The History of an American Obsession* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). Although I do not significantly address science fiction in the majority of this dissertation, only remarking on it briefly in the epilogue, I also must mention the following books that have shaped my conception of the postmodern apocalyptic: David Ketterer's *New Worlds for Old*; Peter Y. Paik's *From Utopia to Apocalypse: Science Fiction and the Politics of Catastrophe* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); and Evan Calder Williams's *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse*.

¹²⁹ See, for example, my discussion of Pynchon's historical temporality in [Chapter 3](#).

¹³⁰ Clearly one of the vagaries of this definition permits nuclear expression before Hiroshima. Indeed, not only does this permit my current engagement with William Carlos Williams's early poetry, but I would suggest that this aspect of the nuclear imagination—its ability to imagine (and then produce) mass-death on a (potentially globally) vast scale—makes Hiroshima possible in the first place. On this last point in particular, see John Canady, *The Nuclear Muse: Literature, Physics and the First Atomic Bombs* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2000).

¹³¹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 6.

¹³² For one of the best articulations of this slipperiness, see Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*.

¹³³ Freud's notion of *trauerarbeit* roughly translates into "mourning-work" or "the work of mourning." He discusses the work of mourning in "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, ed. James Strachey (London, UK: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), 244-45. Eric Santner develops this concept at length when discussing postwar German film and its response to Auschwitz, see *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990). Santner's book also draws heavily on Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich's study on the failure of the German people to do this work of mourning in the wake of National Socialism, in their book, *The Inability to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behavior*, trans. Beverley R. Placzek (New York: Grove Press, 1975). For a considerably different engagement with the work of mourning, see Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Regarding a different sense of the imagination than the one I am concerned with in this chapter, Benjamin—regarding the baroque and what he called *Trauerspiel*, or "mourning play"—wrote: "The baroque knows no eschatology; and for that very reason it possesses no mechanism by which all earthly things are gathered in together and exalted before being consigned to their end. The hereafter is emptied of everything which contains the slightest breath of this world, and from it the baroque extracts a profusion of things which customarily escaped the grasp of artistic formulation and, at its high point, brings them violently into the light of day, in order to clear an ultimate heaven, enabling it, as a vacuum, one day to destroy the world with catastrophic violence" (66). There is perhaps productive work to be done on the nuclear imagination as *baroque*. This is also to note my indebtedness to Adam Lowenstein's *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

¹³⁴ On the nuclear sublime, see Frances Ferguson, “The Nuclear Sublime,” *Diacritics* 14, no. 2, Nuclear Criticism (Summer 1984): 4-10.

¹³⁵ Derrida, *Psyche*, 399.

¹³⁶ See Grausam, *On Endings*, in which he argues that the appearance of a number of complex metafictional novels in the 1950s-1980s “are attempts to imagine literary forms appropriate to new conceptions of temporality and historicity,” because “thermonuclear weapons, especially in the missile age, offer a radically new conception of what ending might mean” (5). The proliferation of these self-conscious and self-referential fictions during the high postmodern are, for Grausam, evidence of the insufficiency of previous understandings of narrative to contend with the novelty of a technology that introduces “the possibility of an expansive future [. . .] called into question” (5). Though I agree with Grausam, and some of the work I do in subsequent chapters reframes how postmodern metafiction contends with the nuclear referent is germane to his discussion, my aim here is to trace how the nuclear calls the literary into question in ways not limited to narrative alone. This is one of my primary reasons for privileging the term *archive* throughout this dissertation.

¹³⁷ Bruce Comens, *Apocalypse and After: Modern Strategy and Postmodern Tactics in Pound, Williams, and Zukofsky* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1995), 132.

¹³⁸ This is the term Canady uses for the scientists and other residents of Los Alamos during the Manhattan Project.

¹³⁹ Canady, 163.

¹⁴⁰ For the most authoritative account of the development of atomic weaponry see Richard Rhodes, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986).

¹⁴¹ Canady, 163.

¹⁴² Oppenheimer, J. Robert, “The Atom Bomb and College Education,” in *The General Magazine and Historical Chronicle*, University of Pennsylvania General Alumni Society (1946): 265, quoted in Rhodes, 676.

¹⁴³ Len Giovannitti and Fred Free, *The Decision to Drop the Bomb* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1965), 197, quoted in Rhodes, 676. This passage appears in an interview included in the biographical documentary, *The Day After Trinity: J. Robert Oppenheimer and the Atomic Bomb* (dir. Jon Else, 1981). This portion of the interview with Oppenheimer can be seen at <http://www.atomicarchive.com/Movies/Movie8.shtml>. I am indebted to Canady for tracing this bibliographic information. Indeed, much of Canady’s analysis of Oppenheimer’s words are a result of the convolution of quotation and reference involved: “Oppenheimer’s quotation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, for instance, is itself often quoted by individuals attempting to ‘explain’ the meaning of nuclear weapons. Yet Vishnu’s words—‘Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds’—are most often cited out of context of Oppenheimer’s ‘own’ words, to the extent that they are quoted in translations that differ from Oppenheimer’s. [“Destroyer” is often translated as “shatterer.”] This serves to dislocate them even further from their original historical context, turning them into disembodied utterances appropriated as an expression of any given individual’s sense of the significance of nuclear weapons. But is it possible to avoid this appropriation entirely, or have these words already been transformed by quotation beyond any possible return to their proper context? And what is their proper context? I have quoted them from [Rhodes’s] *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* quoting *The Decision to Drop the Bomb* quoting a documentary film quoting an interview film quoting Oppenheimer quoting a translation (possibly his own) quoting the *Bhagavad Gita* quoting Vishnu. Which of these contexts is the true one? At what point do these words refer to a direct apprehension of the real world rather than to another

individual's conception of yet other individuals' apprehensions of some ambiguous referent?" (Canady 185).

¹⁴⁴ Canady, 202.

¹⁴⁵ Stein, Gertrude, "Reflection on the Atomic Bomb" (1946), in *The Previously Uncollected Writings of Gertrude Stein: Reflection on the Atomic Bomb*, Vol. 1, ed. Robert Bartlett Haas (Los Angeles, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1973), 161.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ As Canady writes: "Oppenheimer's utterance likewise stems from its situation within a network of similar allusions that insist on a conception of nuclear weapons that is deeply, and perhaps alarmingly, literary" (184).

¹⁴⁸ Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1997 [1914]), 21.

¹⁴⁹ Derrida, *Psyche*, 399-400. The passage continues: "It is not certain that all the other archives, whatever their material basis may be, have such a referent absolutely outside themselves, outside their own possibility. If they do have one, then they can rightfully reconstitute themselves and thus, in some other fashion, survive. But if they do not have one, or the extent that they do not have one outside themselves, they find themselves in the situation of literature. One might say that they participate in literature inasmuch as literature produces its referent as a fictive or fabulous referent that in itself depends upon the possibility of archivization and that in itself is constituted by the act of archivization" (400).

¹⁵⁰ There have been a spate of interesting recent (popular) journalistic and literary articles on climate change, particularly in the wake of Hurricane Sandy and 2012, the hottest year on record. See Jill Fitzsimmons, "Study: The Warmest Year on Record Received Cool Climate Coverage," *Media Matters for America* [8 Jan. 2013], <http://mediamatters.org/research/2013/01/08/study->

[warmest-year-on-record-received-cool-clim/192079](#). For a small sampling of these see: Gerry Canavan, “Après Nous, le Déluge,” *The New Inquiry* 12 (Jan. 2013), <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/apres-nous-le-deluge/>; Alyssa Battistoni, “The Flood Next Time: Life After Emergency,” *Jacobin* 9 (Dec. 2012), <http://jacobinmag.com/2012/12/the-flood-next-time/>; Chad Harbach, “The End, The End, The End: Why Bother Dreaming Up a Devastated World When You Live in One,” *n+1* (31 Oct. 2012), <http://nplusonemag.com/the-end-the-end-the-end>; James Atlas, “Is This the End?” *The New York Times* (24 Nov. 2012), http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/25/opinion/sunday/is-this-the-end.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&; Andrew Martin, “Hurricane Sandy and the Disaster Preparedness Economy,” *The New York Times* (10 Nov. 2012), <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/11/business/hurricane-sandy-and-the-disaster-preparedness-economy.html?hp>; and Charles Stross, “2512,” *Charlie’s Diary* (8 Nov. 2012), <http://www.antipope.org/charlie/blog-static/2012/11/2512.html>.

¹⁵¹ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), ed. C.P. Dutt (New York: International Publishers, 1963), 15. For a reworking of this famous quip from Marx with regard to the 2008 global financial crisis, see Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*.

¹⁵² See my discussion of Thomas Pynchon and Paul Ricoeur in [Chapter 3](#) on this point.

¹⁵³ Manuel De Landa, *War in the Age of Intelligent Machines* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 2-3.

¹⁵⁴ De Landa, 6-7. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari discuss the “machinic phylum” in Chapter 12, “1227: Treatise on Nomadology:—The War Machine,” of *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Vol. 2, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 351-423. They write: “We may speak of a *machinic phylum*, or technological lineage, wherever we find a *constellation of singularities, prolongable by certain operations*,

which converge and make the operations converge, upon one or several assignable traits of expression. If the singularities or operations diverge, in different materials or in the same material, we must distinguish two different phyla: this is precisely the case for the iron sword, descended from the dagger, and the steel saber, descended from the knife. Each phylum has its own singularities and operations, its own qualities and traits, which determine the relation of desire to the technical element (the affects the saber ‘has’ are not the same as those of the sword)” (406). De Landa further clarifies his use of the term “machinic phylum” as follows: “There are, then, two different meanings of the term ‘machinic phylum’—in its more general sense, it refers to any process in which order emerges out of chaos as a result of nonlinear dynamics [I also call this simply “emergence” following Steven Johnson in Ch. 4]: rivers and tsunamis in the hydrosphere, wind patterns and storm systems in the atmosphere and so on. All these processes depend on critical points in the rate of flow of matter and energy, so the machinic phylum may be defined more generally as ‘the flow of matter-movement, the flow of matter in continuous variation, conveying singularities.’ I will use the term machinic phylum to refer both to processes of self-organization in general and to particular assemblages in which the power of these processes may be integrated” (De Landa 20). Here De Landa understands the term “singularity” to mean: “Th[e] points or thresholds in the rate of flow of matter and energy are referred to as ‘singular’ because they are rare and special” (15). A singularity occurs in this line of thinking when a threshold in matter is reached, and a different (and higher) level of order emerges. The thing that emerges is a singularity.

¹⁵⁵ For De Landa, “[i]t is as if the principles that guide the self-assembly of these ‘machines’ (e.g., chemical clocks, multicellular organisms or nest-building insect colonies) are at some deep level essentially similar. [. . . T]hat behind the self-organization there is a ‘machinic phylum,’

that behind the spontaneous emergence of order out of chaos there are deep mathematical similarities, would hardly escape the notice of our hypothetical robot historian. After all, the emergence of ‘robot consciousness’ could have been the result of such a process of self-organization. Such processes [. . .] have in fact been observed in large computer networks (and in small neural nets). Furthermore, the notion of a machinic phylum blurs the distinction between organic and non-organic life, which is just what a robot historian would like to do. From its point of view, as we have seen, humans would have served only as machines’ surrogate reproductive organs until robots acquired their own self-replication capabilities. But both human and robot bodies would ultimately be related to a common phylogenetic line: the machinic phylum” (7). For perhaps the most widely read accounts of the effects of this kind of posthuman imagination on literature, see Donna Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s” (1991), in *The Haraway Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 7-46; and N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1999).

¹⁵⁶ D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: Penguin, 1977 [1923]), 9.

¹⁵⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Poet” (1844), in *The Essential Writing of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 301.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 304.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 305, emphasis mine.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, emphases mine.

¹⁶² Lawrence, *Studies*, 172.

¹⁶³ On the notion of the “rhizome” see Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, particularly the opening chapter, “Introduction: Rhizome” (3-25). As Deleuze puts it elsewhere, “[t]he object of American literature,” which Whitman embodies for Deleuze, “is to establish relations between the most diverse aspects of the United States’ geography—the Mississippi, the Rockies, the Prairies—as well as its history, struggles, loves, and evolution” (“Whitman” [1993], in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco [Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997], 59).

¹⁶⁴ Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself” (1855), in *Whitman: Poetry and Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1996), 84, l. 1253.

¹⁶⁵ Lawrence, *Studies*, 171.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 172.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 173.

¹⁶⁹ Whitman, 81, ll. 1189, 1195-1196.

¹⁷⁰ 1 Cor. 13:12. Perhaps a more authoritative translation of St. Paul’s words here from *First Corinthians* would be: “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face” (Michael D. Coogan ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, 3rd ed. [New York: Oxford University Press, 2001], 286 New Testament).

¹⁷¹ See Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna, ed. John Dillon (New York: Penguin, 1991), particularly the Eighth Tractate, “Nature, Contemplation, and the One,” 233-247.

¹⁷² William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, Newly Revised Ed., ed. David V. Erdman (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), 39.

¹⁷³ Blake, "Auguries of Innocence" (1863), in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, 490.

¹⁷⁴ Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 45.

¹⁷⁵ Lawrence, *Studies*, 179. Translation mine. This phrase is often attributed to King Louis XV (1710-1774) of France or else his mistress, Madame de Pompadour (1721-1764).

¹⁷⁶ Whitman, 32, ll. 117-119.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 66, ll. 811.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, ll. 810, 813-825.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 63, l. 796.

¹⁸⁰ On poetic absorption, see Charles Bernstein, "Artifice of Absorption," in *A Poetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 9-89.

¹⁸¹ See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None* (1883-1885), trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 1995 [1954]).

¹⁸² Lawrence, *Studies*, 179.

¹⁸³ D.H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse, and the Writings on Revelation* (1931), ed. Mara Kalnins (New York: Penguin, 1995), 79.

¹⁸⁴ Whitman, 30, ll. 38-9.

¹⁸⁵ William Carlos Williams, "Russia" (1948), in *The Collected Poems of Williams Carlos Williams: 1939-1962*, Vol. 2, ed. Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1988), 145.

¹⁸⁶ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Biographia Literaria* (1817), Vol. 7, eds. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 304.

¹⁸⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (1968), trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 35.

¹⁸⁸ Wallace Stevens, "Williams" (1934), in *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York: The Library of America, 1997), 768-9.

¹⁸⁹ Yvor Winters, "Poetry of Felling" (1939), in *William Carlos Williams: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. J. Hillis Miller (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 66. Winters added a curious postscript to this initial review essay for its publication in J. Hillis Miller's collection, in which he concludes by saying that Williams "was a foolish and ignorant man, but at moments a fine stylist" (69), which not only undercuts his earlier assessment of Williams's collected poetry as "indispensable to anyone seriously concerned with American poetry" (68), but participates in an ungenerous reappraisal that one can only undertake after the subject of the reappraisal has passed on.

¹⁹⁰ Stevens, 769.

¹⁹¹ This line first appears in "Paterson" (1927): "—Say it, no ideas but in things—" (William Carlos Williams, "Paterson," in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: 1909-1939*, Vol. 1, eds. A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan [New York: New Directions, 1986], 263); and then again in "A Sort of Song" in *The Wedge* (1944) in a parenthetical aside: "Compose. (No ideas / but in things.) Invent!" (Williams, *Collected Poems*, Vol. 2, 55); and then probably most famously in Williams's long poem, *Paterson* (1963), in Book I (1946), with quite a bit more emphasis: "Say it! No ideas but in things" (William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*, Revised ed., ed. Christopher MacGowan [New York: New Directions, 1992], 9).

¹⁹² Winters, 67.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁹⁴ Stevens, 770. The passage continues: “For instance, no one except a *surréaliste* himself would hesitate to characterize that whole school as romantic, dyed through and through with the most authentic purple. What, then, is a romantic poet now-a-days? He happens to be one who still dwells in an ivory tower, but who insists that life there would be intolerable except for the fact that one has, from the top, such an exceptional view of the public dump and the advertising signs of Snider’s Catsup, Ivory Soap, and Chevrolet Cars; he is the hermit who dwells alone with the sun and moon, but insists on taking a rotten newspaper. Williams shares a good deal of this with his contemporaries in the manner and for the reason indicated, the attempt to define him and his work is not to be taken as an attempt to define anyone or anything else” (Stevens 770).

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Abrams, 68. Abrams goes on to discuss more modern poetry by “deliberately echo[ing] Wallace Stevens, as a reminder that the Romantic endeavor to salvage traditional experience and values by accommodating them to the premises tenable to a later age has continued to be a prime concern of post-Romantic poets” (69). He further adds in a note that “[i]n one of Stevens’ prose renderings of this concept: ‘The major poetic idea in the world is and always has been the idea of God. One of the visible movements of the modern imagination is the movement away from the idea of God. The poetry that created the idea of God will either adapt it to our different intelligence, or create a substitute for it, or make it unnecessary’ (Stevens, “Concerning a Chair of Poetry” [1940], 806, quoted in Abrams, 491).

¹⁹⁷ Williams, *Paterson*, 9.

¹⁹⁸ Williams must be referring to the appearance of Eliot’s *Prufrock and Other Observations* in 1917, rather than its initial publication in the June 1915 issue of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, as he completed the “Prologue” of *Kora in Hell* 1 September 1918.

¹⁹⁹ William Carlos Williams, *I Wanted to Write a Poem: The Autobiography of the Works of a Poet*, ed. Edith Heal (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1967 [1958]), 30, emphases mine. This “autobiography” records conversations Williams had with Edith Heal in 1958 about each of his published works.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

²⁰¹ Kenneth Burke, “Heaven’s First Law” (1922), in *William Carlos Williams: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. J. Hillis Miller (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 48.

²⁰² Even Bruce Comens, no matter how much he is reading Williams as a transitional poet between Ezra Pound’s modernism and Louis Zukofsky’s postmodernism, says that “Williams goes on to develop a tactical approach—albeit *tinged with Romanticism*—wherein he occupies no position of his own, no depth, but expresses himself and asserts his existence by temporarily appropriating the appearances, the surfaces, that surround him, whether they be physical or discursive” (Comens 89, emphases mine).

²⁰³ Hart Crane, “Cape Hatteras,” in *The Complete Poems of Hart Crane*, Centennial ed., ed. Marc Simon (New York: Liverwright, 2001), 83, l. 209.

²⁰⁴ Williams, “The End of the Rope” (1950), in *Collected Poems*, Vol. 2, 223, ll. 6-12.

²⁰⁵ As Joseph N. Riddel puts it: “The problem of [Williams’s] Americanness, the influence especially of Whitman and the strange attraction of Poe, has been for most of his critics the point of departure in identifying the special quality of his work” (*The Inverted Bell: Modernism and the Counterpoetics of William Carlos Williams* [Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1974], 11). Riddel, however, does not locate Williams’s “origin” in Whitman, but rather sees Williams, and consequently American verse itself, engaged in an eternal process of beginning: “It would be possible to write a ‘history’ of American poetics in terms of

‘beginnings,’ or better, in terms of the changing sense of beginning. For as Williams concluded, *American* is synonymous with *beginner*, and a beginner is one who, if he is not to be condemned to the past, is bound to reinterpret it and thus to create his own time. He is not Whitman’s ‘literatus.’ The American poet, Williams suggests, is any poet committed to the endless search for his own origins. He is committed, that is, to the paradoxical role of depriving himself of all his myths in his effort to discover a primary myth—an idea coincident with things, where his new beginning will not be repetition” (44). For other discussions of Williams’s relationship to Whitman, see James Breslin, *William Carlos Williams: An American Artist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); and Stephen Tapscott, *American Beauty: William Carlos Williams and the Modernist Whitman* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984). On Whitman’s enduring legacy for other twentieth century American poets, see Donald Davie, *Two Ways Out of Whitman: American Essays*, ed. Doreen Davie (Manchester, UK: Carcanet Press, 2000).

²⁰⁶ Williams, “Author’s Introduction” to *The Wedge* (1944), in *Collected Poems*, Vol. 2, 54.

²⁰⁷ Williams, *Spring and All*, in *Collected Poems*, Vol. 1, 178.

²⁰⁸ Abrams, 334.

²⁰⁹ Williams, *Spring and All*, in *Collected Poems*, Vol. 1, 178.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, emphases mine.

²¹¹ Whitman, 27, l. 3.

²¹² Williams, *Collected Poems*, Vol. 1, 178.

²¹³ *Ibid.*

²¹⁴ M. M. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson, trans. and ed. Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), 324.

²¹⁵ J. Hillis Miller, “Williams: Poet of Reality,” in *Williams Carlos Williams*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 30.

²¹⁶ Abrams, 375.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 377.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*

²¹⁹ Williams, *Collected Poems*, Vol. 1, 178. Though it should be noted here that Williams is posing his art against Friedrich Schiller (rather than Coleridge).

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 177.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 178.

²²² *Ibid.*, emphasis mine.

²²³ Abrams, 377.

²²⁴ Williams, *Collected Poems*, Vol. 1, 179.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 179-180.

²²⁶ Comens, 97.

²²⁷ Williams, *Collected Poems*, Vol. 1, 179.

²²⁸ There is also something about Williams’s critique that potentially resonates with Heidegger’s notion that “[t]he threat to man does not come in the first instance from the potentially lethal machines and apparatus of technology. The actual threat has already affected man in his essence” (Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology” (1951), in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt [New York: Harper & Row, 1977], 28).

²²⁹ Derrida, *Psyche*, 393-394.

²³⁰ Williams, *Collected Poems*, Vol. 1, 179.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 181.

²³² Ibid., 234, emphases mine.

²³³ Miller, “Williams,” 31

²³⁴ Williams, *Collected Poems*, Vol. 1, 180.

²³⁵ Further, it should be noted that the *quite* limited initial printing of *Spring and All* makes it potentially unlikely that Winters or Stevens even had *access* to the prose sections of the book, for though many of the poems from the volume became quite famous and were reprinted numerous times, the prose sections of *Spring and All* were not reprinted until 1966 in Miller’s collection of essays. See Miller’s “Preface” to *William Carlos Williams: A Collection of Critical Essays*, vii. As Williams says at one point about *Spring and All*: “Nobody ever saw it—it had no circulation at all—but I had a lot of fun with it” (Williams, *I Wanted to Write a Poem*, 38). I also have to imagine that one of the attractions and reasons for reprinting the (apocalyptic) prose sections of *Spring and All* in 1966 was surely the presence of the bomb in many people’s mind, for though nuclear terror had slightly abated in the wake of the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1963, the threat of MAD in 1966 is obviously still very much on the table. Further, Williams’s passing in 1963—and the subsequent attention and reassessment that would occur after such a notable writer’s death—must have made *Spring and All* especially striking and timely for Miller as an editor. Lastly, it should be mentioned that *Spring and All* receives the briefest mention in Williams’s autobiography, where he notes nothing beyond the fact of its publication (William Carlos Williams, *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* [New York: Random House, 1951], 237).

²³⁶ Harold Bloom, “Editor’s Note” to *William Carlos Williams* (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), vii.

²³⁷ Miller, “Williams,” 31.

²³⁸ Taking simply the first example that comes to mind, I am reminded of Friedrich Nietzsche's opening to his brief essay on language, "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense," where he writes: "In some remote corner of the universe, flickering in the light of the countless solar systems into which it had been poured, there was once a planet on which clever animals invented cognition. It was the most arrogant and most mendacious minute in the 'history of the world'; but a minute was all it was. After nature had drawn just a few more breaths the planet froze and the clever animals had to die. Someone could invent a fable like this and yet they would still not have given a satisfactory illustration of just how pitiful, how insubstantial and transitory, how purposeless and arbitrary the human intellect looks within nature; there were eternities during which it did not exist; and when it has disappeared again, nothing will have happened. For this intellect has no further mission that might extend beyond the bounds of human life" (Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense," in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, trans. and ed. Ronald Speirs, ed. Raymond Geuss [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999], 141).

²³⁹ Williams, *Collected Poems*, Vol. 1, 207.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 215.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 179. The passage continues here: "But why, since we are ourselves doomed to suffer the same annihilation?"

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 179-180.

²⁴³ See especially my discussion of Wallace and his engagement with Paul de Man's notion of irony in [Chapter 4](#).

²⁴⁴ Comens, 88, emphasis in original.

²⁴⁵ Williams, *Collected Poems*, Vol. 1, 235.

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- ²⁴⁶ Ibid., 180.
- ²⁴⁷ Ibid., 181.
- ²⁴⁸ Williams, "The Late Singer," in *Sour Grapes* (1921), in *Collected Poems*, Vol. 1, 137, ll. 1-2.
- ²⁴⁹ Abrams discusses the romantic notion of a "spiral movement of history" as it appears in Karl Marx, Nietzsche, Eliot, and Lawrence. See *Natural Supernaturalism*, 313-324.
- ²⁵⁰ Whitman, "Song of Myself," 82, ll. 1190-1193
- ²⁵¹ Ibid., ll. 1194-1197.
- ²⁵² Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 2, 5.
- ²⁵³ Williams, *Collected Poems*, Vol. 1, 181.
- ²⁵⁴ Ibid., 182.
- ²⁵⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁵⁶ Ibid., 181.
- ²⁵⁷ Ibid., 198, 215
- ²⁵⁸ Ibid., 235.
- ²⁵⁹ Ibid., 198.
- ²⁶⁰ Ibid., 235.
- ²⁶¹ Williams, "Catastrophic Birth," in *The Wedge* (1944), in *Collected Poems*, Vol. 2, 56.
- ²⁶² Williams, "The Old House," in *The Clouds* (1948), in *Collected Poems*, Vol. 2, 167.
- ²⁶³ Williams, *Paterson*, 175. One page later Williams writes: "Uranium, the complex atom, breaking / down, a city in itself, that complex / atom, always breaking down / to lead" (177).
- ²⁶⁴ Williams, "Asphodel, that Greeny Flower" (1955), in *Collected Poems*, Vol. 2, 321.
- ²⁶⁵ Ibid., 334.
- ²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 324.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 322.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Ibid., 334.

²⁷² Ibid., 336-337.

²⁷³ Ibid., 324.

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²⁷⁴ Martin Heidegger, “The Thing” (1950), in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001 [1971]), 164.

²⁷⁵ Vicki Kirby, *Quantum Anthropologies: Life at Large* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 48.

²⁷⁶ Thomas Pynchon, “The Deadly Sins/Sloth; Nearer, My Couch, to Thee,” *The New York Times Book Review* (6 June 1993), http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/05/18/reviews/pynchon-sloth.html?_r=1.

²⁷⁷ For a brief overview of Pynchon’s notorious avoidance of the public eye, see Tony Tanner, *Thomas Pynchon* (New York: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1982), 11-19. As Paul Bové has pointed out, Tanner’s short introduction to Pynchon of not even 100 pages “succeeded so remarkably that a great deal of Pynchon criticism has, in the last fifteen years, merely elaborated on Tanner’s

readings” (Paul Bové, “History and Fiction: The Narrative Voices of Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 50, no. 3 [Fall 2004], 657).

²⁷⁸ For the most explicitly nuclear critical, if brief, approach to Pynchon, see Peter Schwenger, *Letter Bomb: Nuclear Holocaust and the Exploding Word* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 57-67. Though I am indebted to Schwenger’s work here, my approach to Pynchon and my understanding of how the nuclear referent functions in his work differs from Schwenger’s considerably.

²⁷⁹ Thomas Pynchon, *Slow Learner: Early Stories* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1984), 13.

²⁸⁰ It must be noted, however, that though the “theme” of entropy has been discussed at length in Pynchon criticism, Pynchon himself is not fully satisfied with his understanding of the term: “Since I wrote [“Entropy”] I have kept trying to understand entropy, but my grasp becomes less sure the more I read. I’ve been able to follow the *OED* definitions, and the way Isaac Asimov explains it, and even some of the math. But the qualities and quantities will not come together to form a unified notion in my head. It is cold comfort to find out that [Willard] Gibbs himself anticipated the problem, when he described entropy in its written form as ‘far-fetched . . . obscure and difficult of comprehension’” (*Slow Learner*, 14). For example, David Seed, an accomplished critic in his own right, misreads the presence of Adams in Pynchon’s work: “like Henry Adams, Callisto is obsessed with energy running down and—perhaps for posterity, but more likely as a solipsistic exercise—he is dictating his memoirs” (David Seed, *The Fictional Labyrinths of Thomas Pynchon* [Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1988], 36). From even a cursory perusal of *The Education of Henry Adams* one should note that Adams is thinking about the very *opposite* problem near the end of his book. Adams does discuss a kind of entropic

inertia present in human activity, and discusses historical decline at length in his 1910 “A Letter to American Teachers of History,” in *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma*, ed. Brooks Adams (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1920), 137-263. In *The Education*, however, he emphasizes that “an immense force, doubling every few years, was working irresistibly to overcome it” (Adams, *The Education*, 1129). As *The Education* concludes, Adams appears to be more concerned with the unlimited energy and force that the dynamo symbolizes. It is clear from the quotation above that this is the aspect of *The Education* that concerned the young Pynchon: “Adams’s sense of power out of control.” Noting Seed’s misreading of Adams is simply meant to highlight that, as Pynchon notes, entropy is difficult concept to fully grasp through language, even for someone like Seed who does an admirable job of clearly presenting it otherwise. For a discussion of entropy’s relationship to apocalyptic structures in Pynchon’s fiction, and a reading significantly different from my own, see Lois Parkinson Zamora, *Writing the Apocalypse: Historical Vision in Contemporary U.S. and Latin American Fiction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 52-75.

²⁸¹ Pynchon, *Slow Learner*, 18, emphasis mine. Pynchon develops World War I as an apocalypse for Europe in his story, “Under the Rose” (1961): “Moldweorp’s chief amusement, Porpentine reflected, had always been to harass. All he asked was that eventually there be a war. Not just a small incidental skirmish in the race to carve up Africa, but one pip-pip, jolly-ho, up-goes-the-balloon *Armageddon for Europe*. Once Porpentine might have been puzzled that his opposite number should desire to go to war so passionately. Now he took it for granted that at some point in these fifteen years of hare-and-hounds he himself had conceived the private mission of keeping off Armageddon. An alignment like this, he felt, could only have taken place in the Western World where spying was becoming less an individual than a group enterprise, where the

events of 1848 and the activities of the anarchists and radicals all over the Continent seemed to proclaim that history was being made no longer through the *virtù* of single princes but rather by man in the mass; by trends and tendencies and impersonal curves on a lattice of pale blue lines” (*Slow Learner*, 106-107, emphases mine). “Under the Rose” was later revised and included as chapter three of *V.* (New York: Perennial Classics, 1999 [1961]), 57-94.

²⁸² Tanner, 75.

²⁸³ See Carl Freedman, *The Age of Nixon: A Study in Cultural Power* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2012).

²⁸⁴ Pynchon, *Slow Learner*, 98.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 18-19, emphases mine.

²⁸⁶ Following Pynchon’s capitalization of this term, I will retain this capitalization throughout this chapter.

²⁸⁷ This statement clearly could be argued with, if for no other reason than The Bomb falling is the semi-mythical V-2 mark 00000 rocket and not a nuclear warhead. This is also to note, as Daniel Grausam has, that “although most critics note the ICBM [Intercontinental Ballistic Missile] at the end of the novel, far fewer have made the case that the nuclear content of the novel should significantly impact our critical readings of it, and fewer still have made the bomb central to their analysis of Pynchon’s long career” (Grausam, *On Endings*, 48). This is an oversight this chapter attempt to rectify in part.

²⁸⁸ Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (New York: Viking, 1973), 760. As Pynchon makes extensive use of ellipses in his fiction, any ellipses in his work that I insert will be bracketed.

²⁸⁹ In *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1998), Giorgio Agamben makes much the same point about the impossibility for the victim of Auschwitz to bear witness to the event: “This means that

testimony is the disjunction between two impossibilities of bearing witness; it means that language, in order to bear witness, must give way to a non-language in order to show the impossibility of bearing witness. The language of testimony is a language that no longer signifies and that, in not signifying, advances into what is without language, to the point of taking on a different insignificance—that of the complete witness, that of he who by definition cannot bear witness. To bear witness, it is therefore not enough to bring language to its own non-sense, to the pure undecidability of letters (*m-a-s-s-k-l-o*, *m-a-t-i-s-k-l-o*). It is necessary that this senseless sound be, in turn, the voice of something or someone that, for entirely other reasons, cannot bear witness, the ‘lacuna’ that constitutes human language, collapses, giving way to a different impossibility of bearing witness—that which does not have a language” (Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (1998), trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen [New York: Zone Books, 2002], 39).

²⁹⁰ Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, 7.

²⁹¹ For a slightly different reading of this scene as it pertains to history and the apocalyptic, Gabrielle Schwab writes: “In the context of the two juxtaposed historical stages [‘secular’ and ‘other’ history], the novel about the apocalyptic Rocket turns into an ‘experimental’ or ‘second degree mythology’ as defined by Roland Barthes, a mythology that demystifies because it is transplanted into a self-reflexive context. That is why *Gravity’s Rainbow* is not an apocalyptic fiction, but an apocalyptic metafiction. And, as we are never to forget, it is a carnivalistic show subversive of its own totalizing tendencies. Its end is a ‘descent,’ a ‘final countdown’ in San Francisco’s [*sic*] Orpheus Theater, initiated by the audience’s rhythmical chant ‘Come on! Start the show!’ But the show is the silent fall of the apocalyptic Rocket on the imaginary world as stage whose end is to be invented by the reader. And yet: the end of *history* is beyond the reader”

(Gabrielle Schwab, “Creative Paranoia and Frost Patterns of White Words” in *Thomas Pynchon’s Gravity’s Rainbow*, ed. Harold Bloom [New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986], 110).

²⁹² Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, 3.

²⁹³ Ibid.

²⁹⁴ See H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (1895), in *Three Prophetic Science Fiction Novels of H.G. Wells*, ed. E.F. Bleiler (New York: Dover, 1960), 263-335.

²⁹⁵ My use of the term “vital matter” here is indebted to Jane Bennet’s thought provoking sketch about the possibilities for a politics that considered matter as vibrant and vital. See Jane Bennet, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

²⁹⁶ Schwenger, 65.

²⁹⁷ Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, 3.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 471.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 712.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 693-4.

³⁰¹ See Steven C. Weisenburger, *A Gravity’s Rainbow Companion: Sources and Contexts for Pynchon’s Novel*, Revised and Expanded 2nd ed. (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2006).

³⁰² *The New York Times* (7 Aug. 1945), 1.

³⁰³ “Smoke and Fire Reach Toward the Sky as Atomic Bombs Are Dropped on Japanese Cities,” *The New York Times* (12 Aug. 1945), 28. Indeed, on 10 August 1945 *The New York Times* reported that the publication of images from Hiroshima and Nagasaki would be delayed (“Bomb Pictures Delayed,” *The New York Times* [10 Aug. 1945], 4). Vincent Leo has argued that this

delay was largely ideological: by delaying the photographs until after Japan had surrendered on 11 August 1945, they would be interpreted as an images of victory rather than destruction (see “The Mushroom Cloud Photograph: From Fact to Symbol,” *After-image* 13, nos. 1-2 [Summer 1985]: 6-12). For an extended discussion of how the initial photographs were received and used, see Barbie Zelizer, *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

³⁰⁴ It is important to remember that the events of World War II were occurring at a remarkable speed during early August 1945. Hiroshima occurred on 6 August and was reported on 7 August. By 8 August, the Soviet Union had declared war on Japan. The second bomb was dropped on 9 August, and Japan surrendered on 11 August. On 12 August, Douglas MacArthur was declared commander of the occupation, the same day the photographs were finally released.

³⁰⁵ Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, 692.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 694.

³⁰⁸ See Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Buffalo, NY: The University of Toronto Press, 1962).

³⁰⁹ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936), in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 222-223.

³¹⁰ Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 164.

³¹¹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989), 193. Žižek directly addresses Heidegger’s horror of the distanceless elsewhere: “For Heidegger, the true problem is not ecological crisis in its ontic dimension, including a possible global catastrophe (hole in the

ozone layer, melting of the ice caps, etc.), but the technological mode of relating to entities around us—this true crisis will confront us even more radically if the expected catastrophe does *not* occur; that is, if humankind does succeed in technologically ‘mastering’ the critical situation. . .” (Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* [New York: Verso, 1999], 12).

³¹² Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, 703.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, 588.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 694.

³¹⁵ Harold Bloom, “Introduction,” in *Thomas Pynchon’s Gravity’s Rainbow*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 8.

³¹⁶ I will address post-nuclear subjectivity and *Gravity’s Rainbow* at further length in the [conclusion to this chapter](#).

³¹⁷ Thomas Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1997), 45.

³¹⁸ “Madness has not impair’d your memory. Good. Keep away from harmful substances, in particular Coffee, Tobacco and Indian Hemp. If you must use the latter, *do not inhale*” (*Mason & Dixon*, 10, emphases mine).

³¹⁹ Shawn Smith, *Pynchon and History: Metahistorical Rhetoric and Postmodern Narrative Form in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 140.

³²⁰ Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon*, 152.

³²¹ This break can also be understood in terms of a break with non-Euclidean geometry.

³²² Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon*, 5.

³²³ This first line also obviously follows from the first sentence of *Gravity’s Rainbow*: “A screaming comes across the sky” (3).

³²⁴ It is also significant that, like in *Infinite Jest*, The Bomb is sublimated through children's games.

³²⁵ Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon*, 59.

³²⁶ Ibid., 350. As Erik Ketzan says, "Although one should never rashly equate a narrator with its creator, we can clearly see Pynchon's own philosophy of presenting history here clearly elaborated" ("*Mason & Dixon* and the Enlightenment," at *The Modern World: Thomas Ruggles Pynchon Jr.: Spermatikos Logos*, http://www.themodernworld.com/pynchon/papers_ketzan2.html).

³²⁷ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 257.

³²⁸ Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon*, 349-50. Each of these figures, of course, was a subject of controversy for their manipulation and fabrication of events. It should also be noted that Cherrycoke changes the tone and content of his story depending upon his audience.

³²⁹ Further, immediately following Ethelmer's formulation of a fabulistic history, Ives LeSpark, brother of the host Wade LeSpark, "announces, 'I cannot, damme I cannot I say, energetically enough insist upon the danger of reading these storybooks,— in particular those known as "Novel." Let she who hears, heed. Britain's bedlam even as the French Salpêtrière being populated by an alarming number of young persons, most of them female, seduced across the sill of madness by these irresponsible narratives, that will not distinguish between fact and fancy. How are those frail Minds to judge? Alas, every reader of "Novel" must be reckoned a soul in peril,— for she hath made a D—I's bargain, squandering her most precious time, for nothing in return but the meanest and shabbiest kinds of mental excitement. "Romance," pernicious enough in its day, seems in Comparison wholesome"' (*Mason & Dixon* 350-1). One of the most clearly metafictional moments in the novel, Pynchon presents the argument against his fabulistic history

as an argument against novelistic discourse itself as “irresponsible.” In parodying the conservative and misogynistic Ives, who holds to the “truth” against the “sill of madness” found in novels, Pynchon makes it quite clear he conceives the novel as particularly well-suited to approach the madness of history.

³³⁰ Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon*, 349.

³³¹ Indeed, reading the landscape is one mode accessing the secret histories (of the elect) in the novel: “Howbeit,— the Secret was safe until the choice be made to reveal it. It has been denied to all who came to America, for Wealth, for Refuge, for Adventure. This ‘New World’ was ever a secret Body of Knowledge,—meant to be studied with the same dedication as the Hebrew Kabbala would demand. Forms of the Land, the flow of water, the occurrence of what us’d to be call’d Miracles, all are Text,— to be attended to, manipulated, read, remember’d” (*Mason & Dixon* 487).

³³² Derrida, *Psyche*, 400.

³³³ For instance, “[t]he Vroom Girls and their counterparts all over town are Daughters of the End of the World [. . .] alert to each instant of the long Day as likely as next to hold a chance of Ruin” (*Mason & Dixon* 487). And there is a posthuman artificial intelligence in the form of a mechanical Duck who also has the power of an ICBM: “its Beak being of the finest Swedish Steel [. . . can] penetrate all known Fortification, solid walls being as paper to this Juggernaut. . . . One may cower within, but one cannot avoid,— *le Bec de la Mort*, the . . . ‘Beak of Death’” (*Mason & Dixon* 374).

³³⁴ Derrida, *Psyche*, 403.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, 391.

³³⁶ Paul K. Saint-Amour, “Bombing and the Symptom: Traumatic Earliness and the Nuclear Uncanny,” *Diacritics* 30, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 69.

³³⁷ “[B]ukimi—also meaning ‘ominous’ or ‘uncanny’—spoke to the suspended question of whether Hiroshima and its inhabitants had been singled out for preservation or for annihilation” (Saint-Amour 60).

³³⁸ Saint-Amour, 79.

³³⁹ Harry Blamires, *The New Bloomsday Book: A Guide Through Ulysses*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1996), 133.

³⁴⁰ James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Vintage International, 1990 [1922]), 344. The passage continues: “The work of salvage, removal of *debris* human remains etc has been entrusted to Messrs Michael Meade and Son, 159, Great Brunswick Street and Messrs T.C. Martin, 77, 78, 79 and 80, North Wall, assisted by the men and officers of the Duke of Cornwall’s light infantry under the general supervision of H.R.H, rear admiral the right honourable sir Hercules Hannibal Habeas Corpus Anderson K.G., K.P., P.C., K.C.B., M.P., J.P., M.B., D.S.O., S.O.D., M.F.H., M.R.I.A., B.L., Mus. Doc., P.L.G., F.T.C.D., F.R.U.I., F.R.C.P.I. and F.R.C.S.I. . . . When, lo, there came about them all a great brightness and they beheld the chariot wherein He stood ascend to heaven. And they beheld Him in the chariot, clothed upon in the glory of brightness, having raiment as of the sun, fair as the moon and terrible that for awe they durst not look upon Him. And there came a voice out of heaven, calling: *Elijah! Elijah!* And he answered with a main cry: *Abba! Adonai!* And they beheld Him even Him, ben Bloom Elijah, amid clouds of angels ascend to the glory of the brightness at an angle of fortyfive degrees over Donohoe’s in Little Green Street like a shot off a shovel” (344-45).

³⁴¹ My reading of the above passage differs slightly from Saint-Amour's, as he primarily reads it through the lens of the destructive effects the Easter 1916 Rising had upon Dublin and how the constant threat of aerial bombardment faced by the city dweller after World War I prefigures the nuclear threat: "If *Ulysses* is at once an epic and comic celebration of the quotidian, it also attests to the more frequent and extreme outbreaks of traumatic violence in everyday urban life and to the fact that in the early-twentieth-century imaginary, the city had begun to host new forms of sudden mass death and severe physical destruction" (73).

³⁴² Derrida, *Psyche*, 400.

³⁴³ Ibid., 401.

³⁴⁴ Much later in *Ulysses* Bloom engages with some quite precarious and fabulistic mathematics in an attempt to understand the generational gap between himself and Stephen Dedalus, coming to the conclusion that "if Stephen would continue to live until he would attain that age [the age of Methuselah, 969 years old] in the year 3072 A.D., Bloom would have been obliged to have been alive 83,300 years, having been obliged to have been born in the year 81,396 B.C. What events might nullify these calculations? The cessation of existence of both or either, the inauguration of a new era or calendar, the annihilation of the world and consequent extermination of the human species, inevitable but unpredictable" (679-80). Here history and calendrical time—i.e. how humans make meaning of their brief life on earth—is destroyed, made meaningless, and nullified by the *inevitable* extermination of the species. The inevitable horizon of a non-revelatory extermination of humanity, at this moment of Joyce's novel, nullifies any attempt to communicate between generations and historical epochs.

³⁴⁵ Joyce, 689.

³⁴⁶ Thomas Pynchon, “Is it O.K. to be a Luddite?” *The New York Times Book Review* (28 Oct. 1984): 41, http://www.themodernworld.com/Pynchon/Pynchon_essays_luddite.html. It is also important to note how Pynchon felt the threat of The Bomb influenced the science fiction of the 1950s: “To people who were writing science fiction in the 50’s, none of this was much of a surprise, though modern Luddite imaginations have yet to come up with any countercrier Bad and Big enough, even in the most irresponsible of fictions, to begin to compare with what would happen in a nuclear war. So, in the science fiction of the Atomic Age and the cold war, we see the Luddite impulse to deny the machine taking a different direction. The hardware angle got de-emphasized in favor of more humanistic concerns—exotic cultural evolutions and social scenarios, paradoxes and games with space/time, wild philosophical questions—most of it sharing, as the critical literature has amply discussed, a definition of ‘human’ as particularly distinguished from ‘machine.’ Like their earlier counterparts, [twentieth] century Luddites looked back yearningly to another age—curiously, the same Age of Reason which had forced the first Luddites into nostalgia for the Age of Miracles” (41). Obviously it should be mentioned that *Mason & Dixon* often complexly parallels how Pynchon describes 1950s science fiction’s treatment of The Bomb.

³⁴⁷ Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon*, 485.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 487.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁰ Benjamin Franklin, *Benjamin Franklin’s Autobiography (Norton Critical Edition)* (1793), eds. J.A. Leo Lemay & P.M. Zall (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1986), 68.

³⁵¹ Pynchon has elsewhere voiced his opinions of a Franklinian notion of an efficient, linear temporality: “In the idea of the time that had begun to rule [Philadelphia] city life in Poor

Richard's day, where every second was of equal length and irrevocable, not much in the course of its flow could have been called nonlinear, unless you counted the ungovernable warp of dreams, for which Poor Richard had scant use" (Pynchon, "The Deadly Sins"). *Gravity's Rainbow* also contains a nod to Franklin with its cult of the "lightning-struck" (664).

³⁵² I think it worthy to note here that Pynchon's citizens fight "in," rather than "on," the emerging nation's behalf, clearly signaling the fighting that will happen "in" America during the coming revolution, the War of 1812, and the Civil War.

³⁵³ Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon*, 487-8.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 488.

³⁵⁶ In addition, my reading of *Against the Day* will more fully address the complex manner Pynchon engages with the physics of light.

³⁵⁷ Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon*, 772, final emphases mine.

³⁵⁸ Albert Einstein, *Relativity: The Special and General Theory* (1916), trans. Robert W. Lawson (New York: Routledge, 2001), 115.

³⁵⁹ Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon*, 772. The passage continues: "Like, 'One minute you're in a horrible high-bourgeois New York parlor, the next out on the Asian desert, on top of a Bactrian camel, searching for a lost subterranean city.'"

³⁶⁰ Thomas Pynchon, *Against the Day* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 431.

³⁶¹ For a comprehensive discussion of time travel in the novel, see Inger H. Dalsgaard, "Readers and Trespassers: Time Travel, Orthogonal Time, and Alternative Figurations of Time in *Against the Day*," in *Pynchon's Against the Day: A Corrupted Pilgrims Guide*, eds. Jeffrey Severs and Christopher Leise (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2011), 115-38. My reading

differs from Dalsgaard's nuanced analysis for the simple reason that I do not think anything like "time" as we usually understand it is functioning in *Against the Day*.

³⁶² As one critic has noted, "the creation of double- and counterworlds via the double refraction in Iceland spar is a central metaphor in *Against the Day* since it points not only to the doubling of the world in the moving images of film and television but also, in metafictional reference, to the doubling power of fiction in general and to the intertwining of the apparently real with its double- or counterimage which makes for the multidimensional world of [the narrative]" (Heinz Ickstadt, "History, Utopia and Transcendence in the Space-Time of *Against the Day*," *Pynchon Notes* 54-55 [Spring-Fall 2008]: 225). I would argue, however, that Ickstadt does not go far enough in his analysis of the Iceland spar, as there is more going on than *merely* the doubling of the world.

³⁶³ Pynchon, *Against the Day*, 431. For an extended, although considerably different discussion of how light functions in *Against the Day*, see Fabienne Collignon, "A Glimpse of Light," *Textual Practice* 22, no. 3 (2008): 547-62.

³⁶⁴ For a discussion of *Against the Day* the privileges its engagement with space, specifically through its complex representation of maps, see Krzysztof Piekarski, Martin Kevorkian, and Elisabeth McKetta, "Mapping, the Unmappable, and Pynchon's Antitragic Vision," in *Pynchon's Against the Day: A Corrupted Pilgrims Guide*, eds. Jeffrey Severs and Christopher Leise (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2011), 47-66.

³⁶⁵ And of course it need hardly be noted that Einstein's formulation of special and general relativity (1905 and 1916 respectively) occurs within the period of time represented in *Against the Day*.

³⁶⁶ Brian McHale, “Genre as History: Pynchon’s Genre Poaching” in *Pynchon’s Against the Day: A Corrupted Pilgrims Guide*, eds. Jeffrey Severs and Christopher Leise (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2011), 18, 25.

³⁶⁷ On the term “remediation” see Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999). Justin St. Clair reads how Pynchon remediates the panorama for the novel in “Binocular Disparity and Pynchon’s Panoramic Paradigm” in *Pynchon’s Against the Day: A Corrupted Pilgrims Guide*, eds. Jeffrey Severs and Christopher Leise (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2011), 67-88.

³⁶⁸ The primary three genres he borrows heavily from are the “juvenile adventure of the ‘Tom Swift’ type, the dime-novel western, and the ‘shocker’ or spy novel [. . . but also] Edwardian detective fiction on the model of Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes; scientific romance, on the model of H.G. Wells; other subgenres of imperial romance, including African adventure and polar adventure; collegiate novels, both the American dime-novel type associated with the generic college-boy hero, Frank Merriwell, and the comic Oxbridge type; and, more fleetingly, various theatrical genres, including melodrama and operetta” (McHale 18).

³⁶⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (1983), Vol. 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 6.

³⁷⁰ Late-nineteenth century / early-twentieth century European imperialism is a consistent object of critique throughout Pynchon’s novels, perhaps best captured in “Mondaugen’s story,” chapter nine of *V.*, 242-297. Though Pynchon’s novel always ostensibly concern US history, as Ickstadt argues: “Of all American contemporary writers, Thomas Pynchon has been the most consistently cosmopolitan” (216).

³⁷¹ It is perhaps not accidental on Pynchon's part either that *Against the Day*'s chronology ends in 1923—i.e., just late enough to include T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* (1922) and Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), but too early to include *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Der Zauberberg*. This is not to suggest that I am aware of whether or not Pynchon has read Ricoeur, or if *Against the Day* engages explicitly with *Time and Narrative*, but Pynchon's encyclopedic reading practices suggest the possibility that he might be familiar with Ricoeur. (E.g., he clearly has some familiarity with, say, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* [1972]: "Fortunately Ralph Wayvone's library happened to include a copy of the indispensable *Italian Wedding Fake Book*, by Deleuze & Guattari" [*Vineland* (New York: Penguin, 1997 [1990]), 97]. For a brief discussion of the presence of Deleuze and Guattari in Pynchon, see Judith Ryan, *The Novel After Theory* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2012], 184-92. For a more thorough Deleuzian reading of Pynchon, see Stefan Mattesich, *Lines of Flight: Discursive Time and Countercultural Desire in the Work of Thomas Pynchon* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002].)

³⁷² Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 2, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), 23.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 76, emphases mine. Though perhaps unintentional, I cannot help but think that the translators' use of "project a world" gestures toward *The Crying of Lot 49*. I also hope this connection resonates with Ulrich Beck's sense of "risk projection" here.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

³⁷⁵ Ricoeur designates three modes of mimesis in the first volume of *Time and Narrative*, which he names mimesis₁, mimesis₂, and mimesis₃. Mimesis₁ concerns itself with the imitation or representation of action: "To imitate or represent action is first to *preunderstand* what human acting is, in its semantics, its symbolic system, its temporality. Upon this preunderstanding,

common to both poets and their readers, emplotment is constructed, and, with it, textual and literary mimetics” (64, emphasis mine). Mimesis₂ links mimesis₁ and mimesis₃, in that it is concerned with the successive episodes in a narrative which move toward an endpoint. Mimesis₂ is the *whole* of the action represented, considered along a temporal sequence, inevitably leading toward an end. “To follow a story is to move forward in the midst of contingencies and peripeteia under the guidance of an expectation that finds its fulfillment in the “conclusion” of the story” (66), and “to follow a story is not so much to enclose its surprises or discoveries within our recognition of the meaning attached to the story, as to apprehend the episodes which are themselves well known as leading to this end. *A new quality of time emerges from this understanding*” (67, emphases mine). Mimesis₃ consequently “marks the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader; the intersection, therefore, of the world configured by the poem and the world wherein real action occurs and unfolds its specific temporality” (71). Consequently, every narrative operates at each of these levels of mimesis, and to understand the interrelationship between time and narrative, is to understand how mimesis₁ and mimesis₃ connect through mimesis₂.

³⁷⁶ See chapter 4, “Between Lived Time and Universal Time: Historical Time,” of Paul Ricoeur’s *Time and Narrative* (1985), Vol. 3, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 104-26.

³⁷⁷ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 44.

³⁷⁸ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 1, 7.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 52, emphases in original.

³⁸⁰ Volume 3 of *Time and Narrative* offers a *particularly* complex engagement with Immanuel Kant, Edmund Husserl, and Heidegger, and what Ricoeur calls the “aporetics” of time. In other

words, I feel the need to emphasize that I am in no way critiquing or arguing with Ricoeur, but simply pointing out a much different temporal aporia whose consideration was not really appropriate to his project anyway.

³⁸¹ And of course, if one responds to the aporia of time in Augustine with the simple answer: time does not exist, time ceases to be aporetic.

³⁸² Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3, 272.

³⁸³ Palle Yourgrau, *A World Without Time: The Forgotten Legacy of Gödel and Einstein* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 129, emphases mine. Also See Kurt Gödel, “A Remark about the Relationship Between Relativity Theory and Idealistic Philosophy,” in *Albert Einstein: Philosopher-Scientist*, ed. Paul Arthur Schlipp (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1949), 557-62.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 121-2, emphases mine.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 131.

³⁸⁶ Pynchon, *Against the Day*, 3. It should also be mentioned that the first line of *Against the Day* makes a previous appearance in *The Crying of Log 49*. In *Cashiered*, the film Oedipa watches with Metzger in her hotel room, the small submarine “Justine” is depicted “at the quai, singling up the lines” (20) right before it attempts, and fails, to make it under the Kephez minefields and the underwater net on its way to the battle of Gallipoli. This phrase is repeated in *Inherent Vice* when Sauncho is describing to Doc the *Golden Fang*’s insurance policy (119-120).

³⁸⁷ McHale, 22.

³⁸⁸ Transnoctial, though it does not have its own entry in the *OED*, can be parsed as “across the night”—“trans” being the Latin for over or across and “nocti” the Latin for night. I am indebted to the *Against the Day* wiki for this reading, which cites the 1913 edition of *Webster’s*

Dictionary as its source. See http://against-the-day.pynchonwiki.com/wiki/index.php?title=ATD_119-148 (accessed 3 May 2012).

³⁸⁹ Pynchon, *Against the Day*, 131, 132.

³⁹⁰ Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940), in *Illuminations*, 257.

³⁹¹ Pynchon, *Against the Day*, 133.

³⁹² Ibid.

³⁹³ Ibid., 456.

³⁹⁴ Ibid.

³⁹⁵ Andrew Blum's recent popular study, *Tubes: A Journey to the Center of the Internet* (New York: Ecco, 2012), presents a convincing argument for systematically, locally, and globally emphasizing the spatiality of the internet. He suggests that, among the other important technologies that make the internet possible, the tubes, the fiber-optic cable that connect everything together are of primary concern for anyone interested in the materiality of the Internet.

³⁹⁶ This fact is not lost on Wallace in *Infinite Jest*, as Himself is both an *avant garde* film director and an optical physicist who worked on the Hydrogen Bomb.

³⁹⁷ See Gilles Deleuze, "Control and Becoming" (1990) and "Postscript on Control Societies" (1990), in *Negotiations: 1972-1990*, trans. Martin Joughlin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 169-76, 177-82.

³⁹⁸ See Steven Shaviro, *Connected; or What it Means to Live in the Network Society* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

³⁹⁹ Pynchon, *Against the Day*, 456-7.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 555.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 1084, 1085. It should also be noted that this ship is not completely fantasmatic within the world of *Against the Day*. Pynchon explains its technological underpinnings as such: “*Inconvenience* herself is constantly having her engineering updated. As a result of advances in relativity theory, light is incorporated as a source of motive power—though not exactly fuel—as a carrying medium—though not exactly a vehicle—occupying, rather, a relationship to the skyship much like that of the ocean to a surfer on a surfboard—a design principle borrowed from the Æther units that carry the girls to and fro on missions whose details they do not always share with ‘High Command’” (1084).

⁴⁰² Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, 9.

⁴⁰³ See, for instance, Tanner, 56-73 and Robert Gibb, “Ideas of Order: The Shapes of Art in *The Crying of Lot 49*,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 17, no. 1 (Summer, 1990): 97-116.

⁴⁰⁴ Though never explicitly named, Pynchon’s engagement with popular culture reveals that the novel most likely takes place during the summer of 1970, and, going by what is happening in the frequently referenced National Basketball Association Playoffs (Doc is an avid Los Angeles Lakers fan), one could easily draw a fairly clear timeline throughout the novel corresponding to the events in the playoffs that year. That said, as so often happens in Pynchon novels, the famous center for Milwaukee Bucks, Lou Alcindor, has anachronistically already taken the name Kareem Abdul-Jabbar in Pynchon’s world, a change he did not make until the summer of 1971 immediately following the Bucks’ title run. It has been suggested that Pynchon may also be an avid Lakers fan himself (a team for which Abdul-Jabbar later played), and Pynchon includes in *Vineland* a vivid description of a fictionalized film about the famous game seven of the 1984 NBA Finals that pitted the Lakers against the Boston Celtics: “Besides Sidney Poitier as K.C. Jones, there was Paul McCartney, in his first acting role, as Kevin McHale, with Sean Penn as

Larry Bird. On the Laker side were Lou Gosset, Jr., as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Michael Douglas as Pat Riley, and Jack Nicholson as himself” (*Vineland* 378). It should also be noted that the promotional video for *Inherent Vice*, produced by Meerkatmedia (2009), explicitly mentions that it is set in 1970. According to Tracy Locke of Penguin Press, this video is narrated by Pynchon himself (see Thom Geier, “Thomas Pynchon Speaks! Author Lends his Voice to *Inherent Vice* Trailer,” *Entertainment Weekly* [11 Aug. 2009], <http://shelf-life.ew.com/2009/08/11/thomas-pynchon-speaks-inherent-vice-trailer/>).

⁴⁰⁵ Thomas Pynchon, *Inherent Vice* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 150.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 251.

⁴⁰⁷ One of the principal villains of *Inherent Vice*, Adrian Prussia works in the service of the Los Angeles Police Department as a hitman, dispatching undesirable characters for the cops. Adrian’s first victim was “a certain pornographer and pimp at the fringes [. . .]. As it turned out, he had also kept lengthy and detailed files on a sex ring based in Sacramento, and he was threatening to blow the whistle unless he got paid a sum he was too small-time to understand was out of the question, though even the minor allegations in his story, proven or not, would be enough to bring down the administration of Governor Reagan. ‘The Governor has some great momentum right now, the future of America belongs to him, somebody can be doing American history a big favor here, Adrian’” (321).

⁴⁰⁸ Which at one point he wears along with a tie that was supposedly Liberace’s (344).

⁴⁰⁹ Pynchon, *Inherent Vice*, 254-5.

⁴¹⁰ Indeed, the novel’s epigraph reads: “‘Under the paving stones, the beach!’ Graffito, Paris, May 1968” (ix).

⁴¹¹ Pynchon, *Inherent Vice*, 240.

⁴¹² Ibid., 251.

⁴¹³ Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (New York: Perennial Classics, 1999 [1966]), 14.

Pynchon is also obviously nodding to the final line of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* here: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" (New York: Vintage, 1995 [1952]), 581).

⁴¹⁴ Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene Thacker, *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007). They define "the exploit" as follows: "*The modern period is characterized by both symmetrical political conflicts waged by centralized power blocs, and also asymmetrical political conflicts in which networked actors struggle against centralized powers.* Many have further suggested that asymmetric conflict is in fact a historical response to the centralization of power. This type of asymmetric intervention, a political form bred into existence as the negative likeness of its antagonist, is the inspiration for the concept of 'the exploit,' a resonant flaw designed to resist, threaten, and ultimately desert the dominant political diagram. Examples include the suicide bomber (versus the police), peer-to-peer protocols (versus the music conglomerates), guerillas (versus the army), netwar (versus cyber war), subcultures (versus the family), and so on" (21-22, emphases in original).

⁴¹⁵ Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, 150.

⁴¹⁶ Pynchon, *Inherent Vice*, 53.

⁴¹⁷ ARPA is an agency of the US Defense Department responsible for the development of new military technology and was later renamed the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency or DARPA in 1972. It reverted to ARPA in 1993, and back to DARPA in 1996.

⁴¹⁸ It should also be noted that though ARPAnet was clearly funded by the US Department of Defense, in the Internet Society's "Brief History of the Internet," they note that "It was from the

[1964] RAND study that the false rumor started claiming that the ARPAnet was somehow related to building a network resistant to nuclear war. This was never true of the ARPAnet, only the unrelated RAND study on secure voice considered nuclear war. However, the later work on Internetting did emphasize robustness and survivability, including the capability to withstand losses of large portions of the underlying networks” (Barry M. Leiner, Vinton G. Cerf, David D. Clark, Robert E. Kahn, Leonard Kleinrock, Daniel C. Lynch, Jon Postel, Larry G. Roberts, and Stephen Wolff, “Brief History of the Internet,” fn. 5, <http://www.internetsociety.org/internet/internet-51/history-internet/brief-history-internet>). Associating the origins of ARPAnet with a network designed to resist a nuclear war that targeted population centers, however, should not be ignored even if the actuality of the relationship between ARPAnet and an imagined nuclear war was more complex than the popular narrative that usually accounts for the origins of the internet. In other words, the US Department of Defense, in funding ARPAnet, had a clear conception of it as a Cold War military asset even if it was primarily developed at US universities for relatively non-military ends. The persistence in the popular imagination of associating the origins of the internet with resistance to nuclear war justifies continuing to invoke this fiction, especially for a writer who is so obviously interested in the impact of nuclear weapons upon the United States as Pynchon is. Further, as Alexander Galloway points out in *Protocol* (2004), there have been many debates about the origins of the internet, and not everyone agrees with the detachment between nuclear war and ARPAnet the Internet Society attempts to stress. Galloway, an excellent Marxist cultural critic, is perhaps more attuned to the structural and military imaginary that made the funding of ARPAnet possible in the first place, clearly disagreeing with the Internet Society, and suggests quite blatantly that “it’s clear that in many ways [the Internet] was built to withstand nuclear attack. The Net was designed as a solution to the vulnerability of the military’s

centralized system of command and control during the 1950s and beyond. For, the argument goes, if there are no central command centers, then there can be no central targets and overall damage is reduced. [. . .] In fact, the reason why the Internet would withstand nuclear attack is precisely because its internal protocols are the enemy of bureaucracy, of rigid hierarchy, and of centralization” (Alexander R. Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists After Decentralization* [Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004], 29), which is something Pynchon is clearly thinking about in *Inherent Vice*.

⁴¹⁹ I also address ARPAnet and Galloway with regard to *Infinite Jest* and InterLace Telentertainment in [Chapter 4](#).

⁴²⁰ Pynchon, *Inherent Vice*, 53.

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁴²² *Ibid.*

⁴²³ Galloway and Thacker, 4.

⁴²⁴ Pynchon, *Inherent Vice*, 365.

⁴²⁵ Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, 150.

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁷ Pynchon, *Inherent Vice*, 54.

⁴²⁸ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁴²⁹ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁴³⁰ *Ibid.*, 258.

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*, 365.

⁴³² Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, 14.

⁴³³ Pynchon, *Inherent Vice*, 365.

⁴³⁴ Ibid. 108.

⁴³⁵ Mike Davis, *The Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 18.

⁴³⁶ Pynchon, *Inherent Vice*, 109.

⁴³⁷ Ibid., 366.

⁴³⁸ Ibid., 367, 368.

⁴³⁹ Which I address further in [Chapter 4](#).

⁴⁴⁰ And I think Paul Ricoeur means something like this when defines *archives* as: “Archives constitute the documentary stock of an institution. It is a specific activity of this institution that produced them, gathers them, and conserves them. And the deposit thereby constituted is an authorized deposit through some stipulation added to the one that sets up the entity for which the archives are ‘archives’” (*Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3, 177).

⁴⁴¹ As Galloway and Thacker put it, Doc is a hero who emerges from a contradiction in the network/optical society: “Hence a contraction: the self-regulating and self-organizing qualities of emergent networked phenomena appear to engender and supplement the very thing that makes us human, yet one’s ability to superimpose top-down control on that emergent structure evaporates in the blossoming of the network form, itself bent on eradicating the importance of any distinct or isolated node. This dissonance is most evident in network accidents or networks that appear to spiral out of control—Internet worms and disease epidemics, for instance. But calling such instances ‘accidents’ or ‘networks out of control’ is a misnomer. They are not networks that are somehow broken but *networks that work too well*. They are networks beyond one’s capacity to control them, or even to comprehend them. At one moment the network appears far too large, as in the global dynamic of climate changes, but at another moment it appears too small, as with

binary code or DNA. This is why we suggest that even while networks are entirely coincident with social life, networks also carry with them the most nonhuman and misanthropic tendencies” (*The Exploit*, 5-6). I think that the Golden Fang can be understood as a network that works too well, an entity that has nonhuman and misanthropic tendencies.

⁴⁴² Pynchon, *Inherent Vice*, 369.

⁴⁴³ Qtd. in Frank Budgen, *James Joyce and the Making of Ulysses* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1960), 67-8.

⁴⁴⁴ Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 21.

⁴⁴⁵ By “mega-narrative” I mean a narrative that is simply too big to traverse without *incredibly* non-trivial effort. Not infinite of course, but prohibitively large. The temporal aspect of reading a mega-narrative should also be emphasized, for often the changes in subject formation attending the duration of a reading are not insignificant.

⁴⁴⁶ For example, I think one way of reading *Inherent Vice* is as a somewhat more accessible rewriting of *The Crying of Lot 49* (his only novel truly set in the “contemporary”), especially in light of his public disavowal of the novel in the introduction to *Slow Learner* and elsewhere. *Inherent Vice*, even though it may very well be his final novel at the moment, is a kind of entrance point to his work.

⁴⁴⁷ See Julie Bosman, “Periodic Novel, Coming Soon,” *The New York Times* (20 Nov. 2011), <http://mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/20/periodic-novel-coming-soon/>.

⁴⁴⁸ I discuss Grossman’s project more in the Coda.

⁴⁴⁹ There is some evidence, although second-hand, that Pynchon conceived of his novels as one “endless text.” According to Andrew Gordon’s account of his brief encounter with Thomas Pynchon and his friendship with an unnamed ex-lover of Pynchon’s, “From time to time, she

dropped convincing-sounding details about Pynchon. She said he picked his friends carefully and that they guarded his privacy. She said he had written a second novel in haste and for money and that he was not too proud of it; that would be the just published *Crying of Lot 49*. She claimed that he had people help him with research and that he was working on an *endless novel* in which all his friends would appear, including her” (Andrew Gordon, “Smoking Dope with Thomas Pynchon: A Sixties Memoir,” in *The Vineland Papers: Critical Takes on Pynchon’s Novel*, eds. Geoffrey Green, Donald J. Greiner, and Larry McCaffery [Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1994], 171, emphases mine).

⁴⁵⁰ This is Ann M. Blair’s point in *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age* (New Haven: Yale Press, 2010), in which she studies “information overload” in the pre- and early-modern periods. “But the feeling of overload is often lived by those who experience it as if it were an utterly new phenomenon, as is perhaps characteristic of feelings more generally or of self-perception in the modern or postmodern especially. [. . .] Neither the perception of overabundance nor the basic methods of text management were new or unique to the Renaissance” (3, 5).

⁴⁵¹ Harold Bloom, “Introduction,” in *Thomas Pynchon’s Gravity’s Rainbow*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 1.

⁴⁵² Ibid.

⁴⁵³ Pynchon *Gravity’s Rainbow*, 647.

⁴⁵⁴ Bloom, *Thomas Pynchon’s Gravity’s Rainbow*, 3.

⁴⁵⁵ Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, 653.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid., 647.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁸ Kirby, 48.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid. Also, she importantly asks, “What do we forfeit in claiming Nature’s ‘textuality,’ its literacy, as our own?” (48).

⁴⁶⁰ Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, 654-5.

⁴⁶¹ I am inclined to imagine *The Matrix* here, with its towers of humans-as-batteries.

⁴⁶² Ibid., 654.

⁴⁶³ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995), trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 175.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., 176, 32. Elsewhere Agamben is even clearer in his declaration about the political space of modernity itself: “Today it is not the city but rather the camp that is the fundamental biopolitical paradigm in the West” (181).

⁴⁶⁶ For a more detailed discussion of emergence, see [Chapter 4](#).

⁴⁶⁷ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 158.

⁴⁶⁸ Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, 722.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., emphasis mine.

⁴⁷⁰ Akira Mizuta Lippit’s nuclear critical study, *Shadow Optics* (2005), is particularly interesting for his analysis of the effects nuclear light and radiation had on bodies at Nagasaki and Hiroshima, and how Japanese filmic practices have attempted to represent, often by not showing or rendering invisible, the (inaccessible) experience of nuclear light and radiation. “The atomic radiation that ended the war in Japan unleashed an excess visuality that threatened the material and conceptual dimensions of human interiority and exteriority. It assailed the bodies it touched, seared and penetrated them, annihilating the limits that established human existence in the world.

The destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 exposed the fragility of the human surface, the capacity of catastrophic light and lethal radiation to penetrate the human figure at its limit. Under the glare of atomic radiation, the human body was exposed: revealed and opened, but also displaced, thrust outward into the distant reaches of the visible world. It situated the body between not only two worlds but two universes: two separate orders of all things, or even of the same things. Visibility and invisibility, exteriority and interiority, the living and the dead” (Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Atomic Light [Shadow Objects]* [Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005], 4).

⁴⁷¹ Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, 722. I should note here that though I do not comment upon the obvious resonances with postcolonial criticism above, I do not think that Pynchon calling non-Europeans “savages” indicates some kind of colonial myopia in which the humanity of the other cannot be perceived by Pynchon. His frequent condemnation of Western imperialism throughout his fiction and his constant sensitivity to the preterit, the other, the different, and the perverse serve to color this term in the above passage more ironically. At this irony’s most simple level, what is more “savage” than a “Kingdom of Death”?

⁴⁷² And one might even go so far as to say, the narrator (or at least one of them) of Pynchon’s luminous and voluminous fiction. Recall that all of *Gravity’s Rainbow* may very well be a film, and this film’s interruption by a *light bulb* burning out coincides with the Rocket’s final descent (“The film has broken, or a projector bulb has burned out. It was difficult even for us, old fans who’ve always been at the movies [haven’t we?] to tell which before the darkness swept in” [760]). In other words, has Byron burned out, or is there nothing left to project/write?

⁴⁷³ See particularly Ernst Bloch, “The Artistic Illusion as the Visible Anticipatory Illumination” (1959), in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and

Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1988), 141-55; and Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia* (1918), trans. Anthony A. Nassar (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

⁴⁷⁴ For the mega-text's limit, in a Borgesian sense, is the world itself, something too big to ever be totally experienced. Consequently, I am encouraged to look at the narrative work that such massive texts do less as telling a tale, and more as projecting or constructing a world in which narrative(s) sometimes occur.

⁴⁷⁵ Badiou, 14.

4.0 THE INVERTED NUKE IN THE GARDEN: DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S ARCHIVAL APOCALYPSE, PP. 205-312

⁴⁷⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), Revised Ed., trans. D.F. Pears & B.F. McGuinness (New York: Routledge, 1974), 87.

⁴⁷⁷ Which appears in *Girl with Curious Hair* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1989), 231-373.

⁴⁷⁸ Larry McCaffery, "An Interview with David Foster Wallace," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1993), 142.

⁴⁷⁹ Perhaps an even better example occurs in the interview with McCaffery when he discusses *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (dir. James Cameron): "It's almost like postmodernism is fiction's fall from biblical grace. Fiction became *conscious* of itself in a way it never had been. Here's a really pretentious bit of pop analysis for you: I think you can see Cameron's *Terminator* movies as a metaphor for all literary art after Roland Barthes, viz. the movies' premise is that the Cyberdyne NORAD computer becomes conscious of itself as *conscious*, as having interests and

an agenda; the Cyberdyne becomes literally self-referential, and it's no accident that the result of this is nuclear war, Armageddon. . . . Metafiction's real enemy has always been Armageddon. Art's reflection on itself is terminal, is one big reason why the art world saw [Marcel] Duchamp as Antichrist" (McCaffery 134).

⁴⁸⁰ Don DeLillo, *White Noise: Text and Criticism*, ed. Mark Osteen (New York: Penguin, 1998 [1985]), 325.

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 326.

⁴⁸² See Adam Kelly, "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction," in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays* (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group, 2010), 131-46.

⁴⁸³ On recursivity in *Infinite Jest* see N. Katherine Hayles, "The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity: Virtual Ecologies, Entertainment, and *Infinite Jest*," *New Literary History* 30, no. 3, Ecocriticism (Summer 1999): 675-97.

⁴⁸⁴ See David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (New York: Little, Brown & Co., 1996), 983.

⁴⁸⁵ See D.T. Max, "The Unfinished," *The New Yorker* (March 9, 2009), http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/03/09/090309fa_fact_max.

⁴⁸⁶ And it is not lost upon this author that the critical attention Wallace has received since his death has ranged from the respectful, careful, and intelligent, to the scavenging and self-serving. The simple act of joining the current discussion, so recently begun, puts one in the awkward position of canonizer, defender, and advocate. To do so not in terms of one's own interests at the author's expense, but rather in the service of an author who deserves detached and rigorous criticism, must be the goal for such a contemporary intervention. The simple fact that the work of

David Foster Wallace requires such a goal, however, may indeed be a testimony to the attention his work so richly deserves.

⁴⁸⁷ See David Lipsky, *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace* (New York: Broadway Books, 2010).

⁴⁸⁸ George Saunders, Untitled Tribute, *Five Dials: Celebrating the Life and Work of David Foster Wallace, 1962-2008* 10 (2009): 15.

⁴⁸⁹ David Carlisle, "Introduction," in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. David Hering (Los Angeles, CA: Side Show Media Group Press, 2010), 20. This collection of essays is also the first devoted exclusively to Wallace, and one of its primary ambitions is to define a field of David Foster Wallace Studies, something I think it gestures toward beginning quite well.

⁴⁹⁰ Michael Sheehan, "Editor's Introduction," *The Sonora Review* 55-56 (2009): 4.

⁴⁹¹ David Foster Wallace, *Everything and More: A Compact History of ∞* (New York: W.W. Norton & CO., 2003), 305. In the previous sentence, the notational "N" was used to mark a mathematical descriptor absent from my word-processing program.

⁴⁹² Lipsky, 35. Also see Clare Hayes-Brady, "The Book, the Broom and the Ladder: Philosophical Groundings in the Work of David Foster Wallace," in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays* (Los Angeles, CA: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), 22-36, where she also discusses the influence of the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur and Richard Rorty upon Wallace's early work, in particular *The Broom of the System*.

⁴⁹³ David Foster Wallace, "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 8, no. 3 (1988): 51. He goes on to add: "Language's promotion from mirror to eye, from *organikos* to organic, is yesterday's news (except in those two lonely outposts, TV and the Creative Classroom) as the tide of Post-Structuralism, Marxism, Feminism,

Freudianism, Deconstruction, Semiotics, Hermeneutics, and attendant –isms and –ics moves through the (‘Straight’) U.S. academy and into the consciousness of the conscious American adult” (51).

⁴⁹⁴ See *Less Than Zero* (New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1998 [1985]) and *Imperial Bedrooms* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010) for particularly brutal examples of this minimalism.

⁴⁹⁵ For an excellent general discussion on what poststructuralism’s influence on US culture more broadly has looked like, see François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States* (2003), trans. Jeff Fort (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

⁴⁹⁶ His father was a philosophy professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and his mother was a professor of English and Composition at Parkland College.

⁴⁹⁷ Fredric Jameson, “New Literary History and the End of the New,” *New Literary History* 39, no. 3 (Summer 2008): 383.

⁴⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 385.

⁴⁹⁹ Zadie Smith, “Brief Interviews with Hideous Men: The Difficult Gifts of David Foster Wallace,” in *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 237. She later writes, on a quite different note: “He was, in the broadest sense, a moralist: what mattered to him most was not the end but the quality of our communal human experience *before* the end, while we’re still here. What passes between us in the queue *before* we die” (264).

⁵⁰⁰ Jameson’s two references to *Infinite Jest* are sparing and somewhat cryptic in the otherwise quite incisive “New Literary History After the End of the New.” Like much of what is under discussion here, Jameson’s remarks are germane, if for no other reason than he is both relying on

and challenging a rhetoric of ends, and specifically such overly-general categorical terms like “new.”

⁵⁰¹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 12.

⁵⁰² See Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zer0 Books, 2009) and Michael Schudson, *Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

⁵⁰³ David Foster Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction” (1993), in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1997), 41.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid. Wallace goes on to write at more length about what he considers the forebears of this televisual-irony: “The erudite, sardonic fictions of the Black Humorists introduced a generation of new fiction writers who saw themselves as sort of avant-avant-garde, not only cosmopolitan and polyglot but also technologically literate, products of more than just one region, heritage, and theory, and citizens of a culture that said its most important stuff about itself via mass media. In this regard, one thinks particularly of the Gaddis of *The Recognitions*, *JR*, the Barth of *The End of the Road* and *The Sot-Weed Factor*, and the Pynchon of *The Crying of Lot 49*. But the movement toward treating of the pop as its own reservoir of mythopeia gathered momentum and quickly transcended both school and genre” (45).

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid., 63.

⁵⁰⁶ He also suggests as much in his interview with Larry McCaffery: “There are some interesting parallels between postmodern crank-turners and what’s happened since post-structural theory took off here in the U.S., why there’s such a big backlash against post-structuralism going on now. It’s the crank-turners fault. I think the crank-turner’s replaced the critic as the real angel of death as far as literary movements are concerned, now. [. . .] Take a look at some of the critical-

theory Ph.D. dissertations being written now. They're like de Man and Foucault in the mouth of a dull child. Academia and commercial culture have somehow become these gigantic mechanisms of commodification that drain the weight and color out of even the most radical new advances. It's a surreal inversion of the death-by-neglect that used to kill off prescient art. Now prescient art suffers death-by-acceptance. We love things to death now, now. Then we retire to the Hamptons" (McCaffery 135). Though this is clearly not to suggest that Wallace is the first writer to bemoan what William James once called the "PhD octopus."

⁵⁰⁷ Tom LeClair, "The Prodigious Fiction of Richard Powers, William Vollmann, and David Foster Wallace," *Critique* 38, no. 1 (Fall 1996): 14.

⁵⁰⁸ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 63-64.

⁵⁰⁹ It should be also noted, as I don't think it has elsewhere, that Wallace's intimate knowledge of optics is most assuredly due to the three years he spent at the University of Arizona during his MFA. The U of A is one of the two leading optics schools in the country (the other is the University of Rochester), and, combined with the presence of Raytheon in Tucson, he was in a particularly appropriate place to learn about the complexities of optical science. I am also indebted to Doctor of Geometrical Optics, Eric C. Fest, for pointing me toward the historical importance of geometric optics in constructing the Hydrogen Bomb. More on this below.

⁵¹⁰ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 985, n. 24, fn. a.

⁵¹¹ I will primarily be using "Incandenza" or "Himself" to designate J.O. Incandenza, though "James" or "J.O.," would also be appropriate.

⁵¹² Which is an acronym for "Year of Dairy Products from the American Heartland."

⁵¹³ It is not unimportant as well that, with the exception of the citation abnormalities regarding the calendar, it would be difficult to recognize this outside of the context of *Infinite Jest* as a fictional citation.

⁵¹⁴ David Letzler has usefully called such extraneous matter “cruft” in “Encyclopedic Novels and the Cruft of Fiction: *Infinite Jest*’s Endnotes,” *Studies in the Novel* 44, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 267-283.

⁵¹⁵ John Barth, “The Literature of Exhaustion” (1967), in *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1984), 72.

⁵¹⁶ It should also be noted that there is another level of recursivity here, as Barth’s 2001 novel, *Coming Soon!!!*, can clearly be read as a response to “Westward,” as well as commentary upon his youthful first novel, *The Floating Opera* (1956).

⁵¹⁷ See A.O. Scott, “The Panic of Influence,” *The New York Review of Books* 47, no. 2 (10 Feb. 2000), <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/232>.

⁵¹⁸ See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997 [1973]).

⁵¹⁹ With perhaps a bit of exaggerated self-criticism he says: “In ‘Westward’ I got trapped one time just trying to expose the illusions of metafiction the same way metafiction had tried to expose the illusions of the pseudo-unmediated realist fiction that came before it. It was a horror show. The stuff’s a permanent migraine. [. . .] God, even talking about it makes me want to puke. The *pretension*. Twenty-five-year-olds should be locked away and denied ink and paper. Everything I wanted to do came out in the story, but it came out as just what it was: crude and naïve and pretentious” (McCaffery 142).

⁵²⁰ McCaffery, 147.

⁵²¹ Another novel appearing around the same time on par with *Infinite Jest*'s metacritical awareness is Mark Z. Danielewski's remarkable *House of Leaves* (New York: Pantheon, 2000), a novel surely inspired in part by *Infinite Jest*.

⁵²² Note: the "V" is often overlooked by many, and is important with regard to my subsequent discussion of archival accumulation.

⁵²³ Michel Foucault, "Preface to Transgression" (1963), in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 49.

⁵²⁴ This and the following section have been published in a revised and different form as "'Then Out of the Rubble': The Apocalypse in David Foster Wallace's Early Fiction," *Studies in the Novel* 44, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 284-303.

⁵²⁵ David Foster Wallace, *The Broom of the System* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 457.

⁵²⁶ *Ibid.*, 40, emphasis mine. It also must be noted that the doodle is one of Wittgenstein's famous language games. The drawing is of a duck that, if turned 90°, appears to be a rabbit. The lesson of this particular game is that what we call something is dependent upon how we perceive an object, in other words, the context of the linguistic situation. And this is also to make his point: "An image is not a picture, but a picture can correspond to it" (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Philosophical Investigations* [1953], 2nd ed., trans. G.E.M. Anscombe [Malden MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1958]), 101^e, 301.

⁵²⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁵²⁸ Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, 27^e, 55.

⁵²⁹ David Foster Wallace, "The Empty Plenum: David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*" *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 10, no. 2 (Summer 1990): 220.

⁵³⁰ Ibid., 221.

⁵³¹ Wallace, *Broom*, 467.

⁵³² Which is, if you will recall, “Oedipa settled back, to await the crying of lot 49” (Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, 152).

⁵³³ Wallace, *Broom*, 90.

⁵³⁴ Ibid.

⁵³⁵ Ibid., 54.

⁵³⁶ See Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964). Also, for a discussion of Wallace’s construction of landscape and Marx, see Graham Foster, “A Blasted Region: David Foster Wallace’s Man-made Landscapes,” *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. David Hering (Los Angeles, CA: Sideshow Media Group, 2010), 37-48.

⁵³⁷ Wallace, *Broom*, 45.

⁵³⁸ Hayes-Brady, for one, said: “it seems clear to me that *The Broom of the System* deserves to be considered not as the juvenilia of a potentially talented author, but as the self-assured declaration of an artistic and philosophical project that would give rise not just to an impressive career, but also to a rebirth of American fiction” (36).

⁵³⁹ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. and ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis, MN: The University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 159.

⁵⁴⁰ Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” (1967), in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 279. It is also of especial note that Derrida uses *archē* to designate eschaton.

⁵⁴¹ To play on the term “body without organs” used by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972), Vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

⁵⁴² Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 41.

⁵⁴³ John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse* (New York: Anchor Books, 1988 [1968]), 97.

⁵⁴⁴ Though for Wallace “consumption” might be a more appropriate term here.

⁵⁴⁵ This book has also been adapted into a film by director John Krasinski (2009).

⁵⁴⁶ David Foster Wallace, “Octet,” in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (Boston, MA: Back Bay Books, 1999), 147.

⁵⁴⁷ It should also be noted that “Octet” is constantly performing a kind of self-diagnosing literary criticism, furthering the recursive loops between writer, reader, and critic, with Wallace tending to not only anticipate the theoretical implications of such meta-criticism, but to anxiously and obsessively fret over his own theoretically self-aware position. For example: “You were betting that the queer *emergent* urgency of the organically unified whole of the octet’s two-times-two-times-two pieces (which you’d envisioned as a Manichean duality raised to the triune power of a sort of Hegelian synthesis w/r/t issues which both characters and readers were required to “decide”) would attenuate the initial appearance of postclever metaformal hooey and end up (you hoped) actually interrogating the reader’s initial inclination to dismiss the piece as ‘shallow formal exercises’ simply on the basis of their shared formal features, forcing the reader to see that such a dismissal would be based on precisely the same sorts of shallow formalistic concerns that she was (at least at first) inclined to accuse the octet of” (*Brief Interviews*, 151-2). It is also germane to my later conversation to mention that Wallace is using “emergent” here in the way that Steven Johnson does.

⁵⁴⁸ Wallace, *Brief Interviews*, 160.

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid., 159.

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid., 160.

⁵⁵¹ Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse*, 72.

⁵⁵² Though it should be noted that her pregnancy itself is a ruse.

⁵⁵³ David Foster Wallace, *Girl with Curious Hair* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1989), 239.

⁵⁵⁴ Ambrose is clearly Barth because he actually wrote a story called “Lost in the Funhouse” in the world of “Westward,” which we are given to understand is word for word Barth’s story. This is also clearly an allusion to Jorge Luis Borges’ “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*” (1941), *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley [New York: Penguin Books, 1998], 88-95, in which Pierre Menard achieves that curious accomplishment of writing (not copying) *Don Quixote* word for word hundreds of years later, and this reproduction is pretty much universally regarded as a better work. This all of course complicates the map one must draw to trace influence here in a similarly recursive fashion, something Barth himself plays upon in his novel *Coming Soon!!!*

⁵⁵⁵ In other words, this is quite far from Gaston Bachelard’s notion of a house as “an instrument with which to confront the cosmos” (*The Poetics of Space* [1958], trans. Maria Jolas [Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994 (1964)], 46).

⁵⁵⁶ Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse*, 97.

⁵⁵⁷ For instance, see Wallace’s review of H.L. Hix’s *Morte d’Author: An Autopsy*, “Greatly Exaggerated” (1992), in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again* (Boston, MA: Back Bay Books, 1997), 138-45, in which he shows a more-than-passing familiarity with the history of the intellectual formation of deconstruction: “Hix’s discussion isn’t comprehensive, quite: Heidegger and Hegel are scarcely mentioned, Husserl (a major influence of Derrida) is absent, as are such

important contemporary figures in the debate as Stanley Cavell. . . *Paul de Man*, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak” (141, emphasis mine). Recall also that de Man was one of those “aliens” Wallace referred to in his “Fictional Futures” essay.

⁵⁵⁸ de Man, 211.

⁵⁵⁹ I’m choosing to capitalize the term “Empire” here for, though “Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way” appeared over a decade before Hardt and Negri’s *Empire*, I do not think it too much of stretch to understand Wallace as meaning something similar to their use of the term “Empire” in his title

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁶¹ *Girl with Curious Hair*, 310.

⁵⁶² It is almost impossible to read this without hearing echoes of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s critique of aesthetic production within what they call “the culture industry”: “Only by subordinating all branches of intellectual production equally to the single purpose of imposing on the senses of human beings, from the time they leave the factory in the evening to the time they clock on in the morning, the imprint of the work routine which they must sustain throughout the day, does this culture mockingly fulfill the notion of a unified culture which the philosophers of the individual personality held out against mass culture” (Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (1944), trans. Edmund Jephcott [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002], 104).

⁵⁶³ For Wallace’s own take on Barthes’s seminal essay, again see “Greatly Exaggerated.”

⁵⁶⁴ de Man, 215.

⁵⁶⁵ McCafferey, 142.

⁵⁶⁶ Wallace, *Girl with Curious Hair*, 256, emphases in original.

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid., 257, emphases in original.

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid., 340.

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid., emphases mine.

⁵⁷⁰ I feel that Wallace wants to signal both “Pop,” as in father, and “pop,” as in popular culture at this point. In the figure of Steelritter, they are the same thing for his son. Who is of course speaking here while dressed as Ronald McDonald.

⁵⁷¹ Ibid., 341, emphases in original.

⁵⁷² Apropos *The Broom of the System*, we might well recall Wittgenstein’s early work in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* here: “Death is not an event in life: we do not live to experience death. If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present. Our life has no end in just the way in which our visual field has no limits” (Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 87, 6.4311).

⁵⁷³ de Man, 222.

⁵⁷⁴ Walter Benjamin, “Unpacking my Library” (1931), in *Illuminations*, 67.

⁵⁷⁵ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick (Norton Critical Edition)* (1851), 2nd ed., eds. Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2002), 294.

⁵⁷⁶ This section has been published in a considerably revised and significantly shorter form as, “The Inverted Nuke in the Garden: Archival Emergence and Anti-Eschatology in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*,” *boundary 2* 39, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 125-149.

⁵⁷⁷ Note: for ease in documentation, I will refer to the apocalyptically entertaining film at the center of the novel’s clandestine machinations as: *Infinite Jest (V)* and the Entertainment. (It also goes by the names: *samizdat*, *Infinite Jest (IV)*, and *Infinite Jest (VI)*); also, its primary actor, Joelle Van Dyne, proposed calling it “The Face of the Deep,” though this title was rejected by its

auteur as “too pretentious” [*Infinite Jest*, 238]). This is also to suggest that the ambiguity of its nomenclature should be retained and captured by referring to it as *Infinite Jest* (V), something most other critics eschew by predominantly referring to it only as the Entertainment.

⁵⁷⁸ It is perhaps significant here that the US’s apocalyptic problem with waste and garbage is the central theme of Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* (New York: Scribner, 1997), a similarly massive novel that appeared one year after *Infinite Jest*.

⁵⁷⁹ Hayles, “The Illusion of Autonomy,” 684. On the form of the novel itself she continues: “Imagine a huge novel that has been run through the recursive feedback loops of an intelligent agent program and then strung out along the page. Although the words follow in linear sequence, the recursive enfolding would dramatically affect the novel’s structure, sequence, and meaning. For such a novel any starting point would be to some extent arbitrary, for no matter where one starts, everything eventually cycles together with everything else” (684-5).

⁵⁸⁰ Though it should be noted that it might also be nuclear *fission*, or a combination of fusion/fission, as the novel remains ambiguous regarding which process is involved. Ultimately it does not really matter, for the important aspect of “annular fusion(/fission)” is its *annularity*, which, according to the *OED* is defined as: “Of or pertaining to a ring or rings; ring-like, ring-formed, ringed.” The cyclical feedback loop, the recursivity of annular fusion is what Wallace clearly wants to emphasize with this imagined technology.

⁵⁸¹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 572.

⁵⁸² “Kertwang” is a neologism of Wallace’s that he uses throughout *Infinite Jest*, roughly meaning: either a joke played on someone, or something that upsets the smooth functioning of something else.

⁵⁸³ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 573.

⁵⁸⁴ Stephen Burn, *Infinite Jest: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 65. This is indeed the very end of this chapter, and the rest of the short study is devoted to the novel's popular and critical reception.

⁵⁸⁵ Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 130-1.

⁵⁸⁶ See *Infinite Jest*, 787-95, where Molly Notkin, friend of Joelle V.D., is interrogated and is *clearly* lying about some of the content of the film. Boswell, to his credit, attends to the unreliability present in the various accounts of the content of the film, but he ultimately says, "Although this is all we know about the content of the Entertainment, it is *surely* enough" (Boswell, 127, emphasis mine). His entire reading of the novel is based on this "*surely* enough," arguing that "in the same way that a coherent reading of *The Broom of the System* first demands familiarity with Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, a cogent interpretation of *Infinite Jest* first entails a brief encounter with Lacanian theory" (128). That this claim rests on the ambiguous content of *Infinite Jest* (V) is shaky ground indeed.

⁵⁸⁷ See Elizabeth Freudenthal, "Anti-Interiority: Compulsiveness, Objectification, and Identity in *Infinite Jest*," *New Literary History* 41, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 191-211.

⁵⁸⁸ Something that, if we recall how desire is formulated in "Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way" as a desire for *death*, must surely give one pause as to the applicability of relying too heavily on a Lacanian reading of *Infinite Jest*.

⁵⁸⁹ See Steven Moore, "The First Draft Version of *Infinite Jest*," at *The Howling Fantods*, http://www.thehowlingfantods.com/ij_first.htm, for an excellent account of the composition and editing of *Infinite Jest*. *The Howling Fantods* is an immensely useful resource for anyone working on Wallace.

⁵⁹⁰ For a chronology of the events in *Infinite Jest*, see Greg Carlisle, *Elegant Complexity: A Study of David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest* (Los Angeles, CA: Side Show Media Group, 2007), 493-8. Though Carlisle's book is an excellent companion piece to the novel in terms of outlining basic narrative facts, it is woefully inadequate as a "study," providing only a page-and-a-half of "Interpretation" (486-7).

⁵⁹¹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 177.

⁵⁹² Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980), trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1. Before this, she writes: "There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated" (1).

⁵⁹³ And indeed, the central political conflict of the novel revolves around US experialism. The Great Concavity, the site of US experialism *par excellence*, is not only located in New England, but its toxic waste is continually spilling into southern Québec. For the most part, Canada is quite unhappy about the fact that they've been "given" new territory that is horrendously toxic, and firmly want to return this territory to the US. The AFR, however, rather than desiring to return this territory to the US, want to use it as leverage for seceding from both Canada and ONAN To bring about such a scenario, they need to make it more desirable for the Canadian government to let Québec go entirely rather than risk a war with the US. Thus, they want to use *Infinite Jest* (V) to facilitate this: "This was the real objective: a Master cartridge. Unlike the F.L.Q. [*Fronte de la Libération de la Quebec*], *Les Assassins des Fauteils Rollents* had no interest in blackmail or cartographic extorting for the Convexity's [Concavity's] return. Not in re-Reconfiguration of O.N.A.N. or even its charter's dissolution. The A.F.R. were interested only in dealing the sort of

testicular *frappe* to the underbelly of U.S.A. self-interests that would render Canada itself unwilling to face the U.S.A. retaliation for this—if A.F.R. could secure, copy, and disseminate the Entertainment, Québec would be not so much allowed as required by Ottawa to secede, to face on its own the wrath of a neighbor struck down by its own inability to say ‘*Non*’ to fatal pleasures” (*Infinite Jest* 722).

⁵⁹⁴ Donald Pease’s writing about US national fantasy as a slow transformation of new Others being invented in *The New American Exceptionalism* seems particularly appropriate to mention here.

⁵⁹⁵ Jacques Derrida, “Force and Signification,” in *Writing and Difference* (1967), trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 5-6.

⁵⁹⁶ I’m putting “protagonist” under erasure here, for though Hal is clearly the principal character for much of the novel, it is clear that Don Gately is really the novel’s *hero* (without scare quotes), and a much more likely candidate for the term “protagonist.” Hopefully my subsequent discussion of Hal will also justify this erasure.

⁵⁹⁷ The ambiguity of Hal’s “condition” at the opening of the novel has prompted one of the key debates in online Wallace communities.

⁵⁹⁸ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 694. “John Wayne” here does not signify the American actor who appeared in a slew of westerns, but a tennis-peer of Hal’s.

⁵⁹⁹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 11-13.

⁶⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶⁰² As noted above, there are fervent debates about *how* Hal transformed into this person unable to communicate in any way. One theory is that he ingested DMZ (a military grade hallucinogen

that Michael Pemulis acquires; the novel “ends” near the point Hal, Pemulis, and others are about to take it. That said, it is fairly clear that Hal does not ingest it); another is that the mold he ate when he was young finally was metabolized; another is that he watched the Entertainment. At the end of the day, however, no explanation is satisfactory or necessary, for to give a “content” to this change would upset Wallace’s engagement with Derrida.

⁶⁰³ On one of the schemas used to construct the novel—the fractal known as the Sierpinski Gasket—see David Hering, “*Infinite Jest*: Triangles, Cycles, Choices and Chases,” in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. David Hering (Los Angeles, CA: Sideshow Media Group, 2010), 89-100.

⁶⁰⁴ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 8.

⁶⁰⁵ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 788, 1072, n. 326.

⁶⁰⁶ Indeed, one with direct ties to the real power behind President Gentle: Rodney R. Tine, who is also the head of the combined Central Intelligence Agency, Federal Bureau of Investigation, National Security Agency, and other governmental agencies, all integrated into the catch-all Office of Unspecified Services—in this way Wallace very much anticipates something like the Office of Homeland Security.

⁶⁰⁷ Clearly anticipating *this* very type of critical engagement from other A.B.D.-Ph.D.’s. . . .

⁶⁰⁸ The novel presents the possibility that the master-copy of the film was buried in J.O. Incandenza’s head, but not only should we attend to the unreliability of Hal in the opening chapter when he gives an account of disinterring his father’s body (“I think of John N. R. Wayne, who would have won this year’s WhataBurger, standing watch in a mask as Donald Gately and I dig up my father’s head” [16-17]), but also the fact that Himself committed suicide by *exploding* his head in a microwave. In other words, there is no head in which to bury the film.

⁶⁰⁹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 740.

⁶¹⁰ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 14.

⁶¹¹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 381.

⁶¹² *Ibid.*, 391.

⁶¹³ “SHORT-HAIRED MEN IN SHINY TRUCKS ARE NOT DISMANTLING MANITOBAN THERMS BUT INSTEAD MOVING THEM JUST OVER BORDER INTO TURTLE MTN. INDIAN RESERVATION, HORRIFIED N.D. GOV CHARGES—12 point Subheader from Demoted Headliner Already in Dutch Down in the Subheader Dept., Now, Too” (*Infinite Jest* 392).

⁶¹⁴ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 407.

⁶¹⁵ One piece of evidence that these inverted nukes were *not* detonated immediately follows this: “GENTLE HAS COMPLETELY LOST MIND, CLAIMS CONFIDANT, O.U.S. CHIEF TINE AT PRESS CONFERENCE: THREATENS TO DETONATE UPSIDE-DOWN MISSILES IN U.S. SILOS, IRRADIATE CANADA W/ AID OF ATHSCME HELL-FANS—Header: ‘WILLING TO ELIMINATE OWN MAP OUT OF SHEER PIQUE IF CANADA NIXES RECONFIGURATIVE TRANSFER OF ‘AESTHETICALLY UNACCEPTABLE’ TERRAIN—Pretty Obviously Homemade Subheader” (407).

⁶¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 322.

⁶¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 324, though Wallace goes on to stress the difficulty of deciding who exactly won: “though the assignment of point-values for each Combatant’s shirts, towels, shorts, armbands, socks, and shoes is statistically icky, plus there are also wildly involved corrections for initial megatonnage, population density, Land-Sea-Air delivery distributions, and EM-pulse resistant

civil-defense expenditures, so that the official victor takes three hours of EndStat number-crunching and at least four Motrin for Otis P. Lord to confirm.”

⁶¹⁸ Ibid., 321-2.

⁶¹⁹ Ibid., 1023, n. 120

⁶²⁰ Ibid., 322.

⁶²¹ In anticipation of my discussion of simulation below, it might also be useful here to note that Wallace is also pointing to Baudrillard in this passage: “We need to ask what might come after the orgy—mourning or melancholia? Doubtless neither, but an interminable clean-up of all the vicissitudes of modern history and its processes of liberation (of peoples, sex, dreams, art and the unconscious—in short, of all that makes up the orgy of our times), in an atmosphere dominated by the apocalyptic presentiment that all this is coming to an end. Rather than pressing forward and taking flight into the future, we prefer the retrospective apocalypse, and blanket revisionism. Our societies have become revisionistic: they are quietly rethinking everything [. . .]. Museums, jubilees, festivals, complete works, the publication of the tiniest unpublished fragments—all this shows that we are entering an active age of *ressentiment* and repentance” (Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, 22).

⁶²² Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 1023, n. 123.

⁶²³ Ibid., 1024-5, n. 123.

⁶²⁴ Ibid., 1023, n. 123.

⁶²⁵ Ibid., 327.

⁶²⁶ Ibid., 329.

⁶²⁷ Or in other words, they are avoiding nuclear strikes on population centers.

⁶²⁸ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 330.

⁶²⁹ Ibid., 333.

⁶³⁰ Ibid.

⁶³¹ Ibid.

⁶³² Here, one might do well to think of Brian Massumi's discussion of soccer in *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 68-88.

⁶³³ Borges, "On Exactitude in Science" (1960), in *Collected Fictions*, 325.

⁶³⁴ Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," in *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1.

⁶³⁵ And indeed, Hal clues us into this fact when "it also occurs to him that he finds the real-snow/unreal-snow snag in the Eschaton extremely abstract but somehow way more interesting than the Eschaton itself, so far" (*Infinite Jest*, 335). It should also be noted, however, that there is an implicit critique of Baudrillard here, because Hal's fascination with this problem is produced by "marijuana thinking."

⁶³⁶ Baudrillard also heavily criticizes "using" his notion of simulation in contemporary art works in *The Conspiracy of Art*.

⁶³⁷ Furthermore, maps function in other metaphorical ways throughout the novel: dying is often referred to in the novel as getting "de-mapped," killing someone is "de-mapping" them, and people's faces are referred to as "maps."

⁶³⁸ *Infinite Jest*, 335.

⁶³⁹ Ibid., 336.

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid. The passage continues: "The dreaded red UGC beanie has been donned by an Eschaton game-master only once before, and that was over three years ago, when human input-error on EndStat tallies of aggregate SUFDDIR during a three-way SACPOP free-for-all yielded an apparent ignition of the earth's atmosphere" (337).

⁶⁴¹ Ibid., 341.

⁶⁴² Indeed, Pemulis explicitly refers to the events surrounding the Eschaton as “I.-Day’s apocalypse” (1068 n. 324).

⁶⁴³ Kermode, 18.

⁶⁴⁴ Wallace, *Everything and More*, 302, n. 121.

⁶⁴⁵ The most clear evidence is the archival collection of words on page 832 and elsewhere that Gately, a high school dropout, clearly could not have known. The ghost uses “Gately’s own brain-voice” to communicate with him, rather than, say, “speaking” with him, but the presence of language in his consciousness that Gately could in no way have been familiar with, and yet nevertheless understands, suggests that the appearance of Himself’s ghost “actually” takes place. Himself’s knowledge of events transpiring at ETA, that Gately also could not have had knowledge of at the time, also suggests this. That said, given the unreliability of so many other instances in the novel’s narration, the actuality of Himself projecting into Gately’s consciousness remains ambiguous.

⁶⁴⁶ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 838-9.

⁶⁴⁷ “Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment: InterLace Telentertainment, 932/1864 R.I.S.C power-TPs [“teleputers”] w/ or w/o console, Pink₂, Post-Primestar D.S.S. dissemination, menus and icons, pixel-free Internet Fax, tri- and quad-modems w/ adjustable baud, Dissemination-Grids, screens so high-def you might as well be there, cost-effective videophonic conferencing, internal Froxx CD-ROM, electronic *couture*, all-in-one consoles, Yushityu nanoprocessors, laser chromatography, Virtual-capable media-cards, fiber-optic pulse, digital encoding, killer apps; carpal neuralgia, phospenic migraine, gluteal hyperadiposity, lumbar stressae” (*Infinite Jest*, 60).

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid., 416. The passage continues: “No more Network reluctance to make a program too-entertaining for fear its commercials would pale in comparison. The more pleasing a given cartridge was, the more orders there were for it from viewers; and the more orders for a given cartridge, the more InterLace kicked back to whatever production facility they’d acquired it from. Simple. Personal pleasure and gross revenue looked at last to lie along the same demand curve, at least as far as home entertainment went” (417). This construction of the availability and quality of entertainment available to people inhabiting the world of the novel should also clearly signal a step beyond the world of “Westward”’s commercial to end all commercials.

⁶⁴⁹ See Hering, 89-110.

⁶⁵⁰ Galloway, *Protocol*, 11-12.

⁶⁵¹ Hayles, “The Illusion of Autonomy,” 684-5.

⁶⁵² Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics; or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1961 [1948]), 28.

⁶⁵³ Shaviro, *Connected*, 243. Here Shaviro is referring to the “Cultural Fugue” as it appears in Samuel R. Delany’s *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004 [1984]). From Shaviro quoting Delany: “A world is said to go into Cultural Fugue when ‘socioeconomic pressures. . . reach a point of technological recomplication and perturbation where the population completely destroys life across the planetary surface.’”

⁶⁵⁴ Shaviro *Connected*, 10.

⁶⁵⁵ Elsewhere in the novel we are provided more specific details for many of these films when they are watched by Hal or recounted by Joelle. *Blood Sister: One Tough Nun* is a particularly [un]interesting “parody of revenge/recidivism action genre, a formerly delinquent nun’s . . .

failure to reform a juvenile delinquent leads to a rampage of recidivism revenge” (*Infinite Jest*, 990, n. 24).

⁶⁵⁶ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 989-93, n. 24. These films are the captivatingly titled: *Various Lachrymose U.S. Corporate Middle-Management Figures*, *The Clever Little Bastard*, *The Cold Majesty of the Numb*, *Death and the Single Girl*, *Too Much Fun*, *The Unfortunate Case of Me*, and *Sorry All Over the Place*. This list also does not include the other “unfinished. UNRELEASED” versions of *Infinite Jest* (I-VI).

⁶⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 989, n. 24. These “found dramas” basically came about through random chance—say throwing a dart at a page of the phonebook on the wall—and then consisted of imagining what that person’s life was like at that very moment. The “conceptual” aspect, of course, was that one really couldn’t know, nor could that person’s life be filmed.

⁶⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 397. The passage continues: “which art-film habitués of course thought was a cleverly ironic anti-ad joke, and so they’d shell out for little paper theater tickets and file in in their sweater vests and tweeds and dirndls and tank up on espresso at the concession stand and find seats and sit down and make those little pre-movie leg and posture adjustments, and look around with that sort of vacant intensity” (397).

⁶⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 989, n. 24. The “film” was basically a camera turned upon the audience.

⁶⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 991, n. 24.

⁶⁶¹ Umberto Eco, *The Infinity of Lists*, trans. Alastair McEwen (New York: Rizzoli, 2009), 279.

⁶⁶² *Ibid.*, 321, 327.

⁶⁶³ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 985, n. 24, fn. a.

⁶⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 986, n. 24.

⁶⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 987, n. 24.

⁶⁶⁶ Ibid., 990, n. 24. “Madame Psychosis” is Joelle’s stage name.

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid., 993, n. 24. There are also three (fictional) footnotes to this entry detailing the sources of the quotations. They are: “d. E. Duquette, ‘Beholden to Vision: Optics and Desire in Four Après Garde Films,’ *Cartridge Quarterly East*, vol. 4 no. 2, Y.W.-Q.M.D., pp. 35-39”; “e. Anonymous, ‘Seeing v. Believing,’ *Cartridge Quarterly East*,’ vol. 4 no. 4, Y.W.-Q.M.D., pp. 93-95”; and “f. Ibid.” (993, n. 24, fn. d.-f.).

⁶⁶⁸ Shaviro, *Connected*, 60.

⁶⁶⁹ Steven Johnson, *Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities, and Software* (New York: Scribner, 2001), 18.

⁶⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁷¹ Ibid., 19.

⁶⁷² Ibid., 20.

⁶⁷³ Ibid., 21, emphasis mine.

⁶⁷⁴ Ibid., 219-20.

⁶⁷⁵ Ibid., 137.

⁶⁷⁶ Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 54-5.

⁶⁷⁷ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 126 & 752.

⁶⁷⁸ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 981.

⁶⁷⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & CO., 1989 [1961]), 10-11.

⁶⁸⁰ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 427.

⁶⁸¹ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Collier Books, 1991 [1925]), 188-9.

⁶⁸² Nevil Shute, *On the Beach* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1974 [1957]), 279. It should be noted here, however, that Shute was a British writer who wrote *On the Beach* after he had emigrated to Australia.

⁶⁸³ *Infinite Jest*, 981.

⁶⁸⁴ Fitzgerald, 189.

⁶⁸⁵ Whitman, 28, ll. 30-1.

⁶⁸⁶ Zadie Smith is an exception to this statement.

⁶⁸⁷ *Brief Interviews*, 125. The citation for the entry continues: “a 600gb DVD₃ Product with 1.6gb of Hyperavailable Hot Text Keyed to 11.2gb of Contextual, Etymological, Historical, Usage, and Gender-Specific Connotational Notes, Available Also with Lavish Illustrative Support in All 5 Major Sense-Media*, ©2096 by R. Leckie DataFest Unltd. (NYPHDC/US/4Grid). *(compatible hardware required)” (125).

⁶⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁶⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 125-6.

⁶⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 127-8.

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⁶⁹¹ Jorge Luis Borges, “The Book of Sand” (1975), in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin, 1998), 483.

⁶⁹² Declan McCullagh, “Senators Propose Granting President Emergency Internet Power,” *CNET* (10 June 2010), http://news.cnet.com/8301-13578_3-20007418-38.html. As McCullagh points

out, “The idea of an Internet ‘kill switch’ that the president could flip is not new. A draft Senate proposal that *CNET* obtained in August [2009] allowed the White House to ‘declare a cybersecurity emergency,’ and another from Sens. Jay Rockefeller (D-W.V.) and Olympia Snowe (R-Maine) would have explicitly given the government the power to ‘order the disconnection’ of certain networks or Web sites.” The full text of the PCNAA is available at <http://www.opencongress.org/bill/111-s3480/text>.

This is also to note that this section will appear in a slightly revised form as “Apocalypse Networks: Representing the Nuclear Archive,” in *The Silence of Fallout: Nuclear Criticism in a Post-Cold War World*, eds. Michael Blouin, Morgan Shipley, and Jack Taylor (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, forthcoming 2013), 81-103.

And on a further note, I have declined to revise the chapter overmuch, as I wrote it to be a fairly self-contained piece. Consequently, the term “coda” fits nicely, for though I repeat myself (or fail to repeat myself), hopefully there will not be too many contradictions. I feel that this essay further illustrates my points, while pointing new ways forward in my own thinking, particularly in terms of my recent interest in the “mega-text.” To alter it significantly would change its particular cant. To say something I did not have a chance to say in the dissertation, a title I played around with but failed to find a home for: “no apologies, not now.”

⁶⁹³ See Chloe Albanesius, “Lieberman Backs Away from ‘Internet Kill Switch,’” *PcMag.com* (21 June 2010), <http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,2817,2365393,00.asp>.

⁶⁹⁴ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 38.

⁶⁹⁵ Galloway, *Protocol*, 29.

⁶⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, emphases mine. It should be further noted that US nuclear policy *itself* has adapted to the new paradigm of what Galloway calls the distributed network. Jonathan Schell perceptively

analyzes this structural and systemic change in policy in *The Seventh Decade*, noting Donald “Rumsfeld’s most famous articulation of this new strategic uncertainty principle was that you must plan not only for the ‘known unknowns’ but for the ‘unknown unknowns.’ In the last analysis, the target of the nuclear arsenal became history and whatever it might produce—not a foe but a tense, the future itself” (Schell 121).

⁶⁹⁷ It is also interesting to note that the first particularly American archival theory, articulated in T.R. Schellenberg’s *Modern Archive: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago, IL: Society of American Archivists, 1956), emerged in the aftermath of World War II to account for the massive number of government documents that were produced during the war. For a brief history of archival theory, see John Ridener, *From Polders to Postmodernism: A Concise History of Archival Theory* (Duluth, MN: Litwin Books, 2009).

⁶⁹⁸ Derrida, *Psyche*, 400.

⁶⁹⁹ Derrida also gives just such (destructive) agency to archives ten years after the Cornell conference on nuclear criticism in *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1995), trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁷⁰⁰ Fernando Báez, *A Universal History of the Destruction of Books: From Ancient Sumer to Modern Iraq* (2004), trans. Alfred MacAdam (New York: Atlas & Co., 2008), 6-7.

⁷⁰¹ Derrida, *Psyche*, 400.

⁷⁰² His reading of modernism and Joyce are of particular note, and I think much can be gained from continuing his project of reading the pre-Hiroshima nuclear archive. See Paul K. Saint-Amour, “Bombing and the Symptom: Traumatic Earliness and the Nuclear Uncanny”; “Over Assemblage: *Ulysses* and the *Boîte-en-valise* From Above,” in *Cultural Studies of James Joyce*, ed. R. Brandon Kershner, *European Joyce Studies* 15, no. 1 (New York: Rodopi, 2003), 21-58;

and “Air War Prophecy and Interwar Modernism,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 42, no. 2, *Comparative Cultural Studies* (2005): 130-61.

⁷⁰³ Walter M. Miller, Jr., *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), 11.

⁷⁰⁴ Similar post-nuclear misreadings occur in Russell Hoban’s *Riddley Walker* (1980) and Will Self’s *The Book of Dave: A Revelation of the Recent Past and the Distant Future* (2006).

⁷⁰⁵ For a brief history of the literary representation of the destruction of books and archives, see Báez, 188-198.

⁷⁰⁶ Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 164, emphases in original.

⁷⁰⁷ Derrida calls this the “absolute *epochē*” of the nuclear age (*Psyche*, 401).

⁷⁰⁸ Berger, 5-6, emphases in original.

⁷⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, xiii.

⁷¹⁰ This eschatologically anticipatory archival project is not limited to literary fiction. For example, in 1989 it was reported that the Internal Revenue Service, an immense archival institution, has a plan in place to continue to collect taxes after a thermonuclear war. See “Nuclear War Plan By I.R.S.,” *The New York Times* (28 May 1989), <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/03/28/business/nuclear-war-plan-by-irs.html>. The US National Gallery also has a “special archive” whose goal is the preservation of works in the wake of a national catastrophe. See Ned Martel, “Curator Andrew Robison Decides what goes into National Gallery’s Emergency Box,” *The Washington Post* (14 August 2011), http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/curator-andrew-robison-decides-what-goes-into-national-gallery-s-emergency-box/2011/08/08/gIAUTVsFJ_story.html.

⁷¹¹ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 256.

⁷¹² Derrida, *Psyche*, 393.

⁷¹³ Derrida, *Psyche*, 400.

⁷¹⁴ It should also be noted that David Mamet has had a much publicized rift with his previously held liberal-democratic viewpoints that has caused him to embrace neoconservatism. See David Mamet, *The Secret Knowledge: On the Dismantling of American Culture* (New York: Sentinel, 2011) and Jordan Michael Smith, “Was David Mamet Ever Really a Liberal Anyway?” *The Awl* (20 June 2011), <http://www.theawl.com/2011/06/was-david-mamet-ever-really-a-liberal-anyway>.

⁷¹⁵ One might also suggest that the novel does this to an offensive degree, which may account for the roundly negative reviews it has received. See John Fortune, “Footnotes and Fancy Free: The Question is This: Is David Mamet’s *Wilson* a Work of Genius or a Vast Pile of . . . ?” *The Observer* (27 Feb. 2000), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2000/feb/27/fiction.davidmamet>.

⁷¹⁶ David Mamet, *Wilson: A Consideration of the Sources, Containing the original Notes, Errata, Commentary, and the Preface to the Second Edition* (Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 2000), back cover.

⁷¹⁷ *Ibid.*, xiii.

⁷¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

⁷¹⁹ *Ibid.*, xiv.

⁷²⁰ Neal Stephenson, *Anathem* (New York: William Morrow, 2008), 60.

⁷²¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁷²² *Ibid.*, 712.

⁷²³ Charles Stross, “Palimpsest,” in *Wireless* (New York: Ace, 2009), 282.

⁷²⁴ *Ibid.*, 272.

⁷²⁵ “Hyperarchive” is a term that I think nicely designates an archive whose goal, whether stated or not, can be seen in an attempt to gather together as many documents and texts as it can, regardless of content.

⁷²⁶ Stross, 250.

⁷²⁷ Ibid., 249.

⁷²⁸ Ibid., 289.

⁷²⁹ Ibid., 301.

⁷³⁰ Ibid., 287.

⁷³¹ Derrida, *Paper Machine*, 15.

⁷³² Ibid., 17, emphasis in original.

⁷³³ Derrida, *Psyche*, 400.

⁷³⁴ On Gordon Bell’s project to document and record his entire life, see Alec Wilkinson, “Remember This?” *The New Yorker* 83, no. 14 (28 May 2007): 38-46, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/05/28/070528fa_fact_wilkinson?currentPage=all.

⁷³⁵ Galloway and Thacker, 118.

⁷³⁶ From James Cameron’s 1991 film *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, in which NORAD became self-aware and began to eradicate humanity, to the disaster spectacles of Roland Emmerich, to the revivification of the zombie genre—see in particular Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry’s quite compelling essay, “Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism,” *boundary 2* 39, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 85-108—to the ecological disasters of Kim Stanley Robinson or Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2004) and *The Year of the Flood* (2009), there has been no shortage of diverse, multiplicitous, and seemingly ubiquitous disaster narratives during the second nuclear age.

⁷³⁷ Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory*, 573.

⁷³⁸ See *RichardGrossman.com*, http://www.richardgrossman.com/breeze_avenue/.

⁷³⁹ For some interesting beginning efforts to delineate the mega-narrative as a field of study, see Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin eds., *Third Person: Authoring and Exploring Vast Narratives* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009).

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