



# The Rocket and the Whale: A Critical Study of Pynchon's Use of Melville

## Citation

Levitsky, Zhana. 2015. The Rocket and the Whale: A Critical Study of Pynchon's Use of Melville. Master's thesis, Harvard Extension School.

## Permanent link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:24078356>

## Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA>

## Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.  
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

The Rocket and the Whale: A Critical Study of Pynchon's Use of Melville

Zhana Levitsky

A Thesis in the Field of English  
for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University

November 2015



## Abstract

Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* are two American novels that intersect stylistically and thematically. This thesis argues that Pynchon's novel mirrors and reinvents Melville's novel. *Gravity's Rainbow* is not simply engaging with *Moby-Dick*, but actively reprising it for the late 20<sup>th</sup> century through the power of Pynchon's imagination. Pynchon responds to and reimagines Melville's book by mirroring major themes and frameworks from Melville, by adopting some of his central images, and by mirroring his profuse use of technical language to express coded spiritual beliefs and deepening character analysis. The sublime white whale is reinvented as the Schwarzgerät, a German V2 rocket loaded with the mysterious polymer Imipolex G; this profound object stands symbolically at the center of the novel much as the whale, Moby Dick, does in Melville's opus. The monstrous "grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air" (Melville 7) is re-forged as the "white finality" looming "up in the zero sky" (Pynchon 85, 87).

Beyond the functions of the novels' sublime central images, both novels are here recognized as relying on coded technical, specialist language to express metaphysical beliefs. Throughout each novel, the technical language codes the ineffable and the transcendent, allowing for an entry point to understand the functions of symbolic material. *Gravity's Rainbow* echoes *Moby Dick*'s stylistic structure, which is vast and loose. Very few novels are identified from the world's literary canon as "encyclopedic," and the two here discussed are the only examples from American literature, according to

Edward Mendelson's "Encyclopedic Narrative" hypothesis, which is supported by literary critic Andrzej Kopcewicz. It is the similarities in the unconventional, encyclopedic literary style of *Moby-Dick* and *Gravity's Rainbow* that offers one of the strongest arguments for their resonant kinship. I use the work of Lawrence Buell to deepen and critically engage the material; I also engage with the critical work of several other prominent scholars. The metaphors from science extend to the color theory at work in the main symbols present, which are white or suffused with light, such as the whale, rocket, doubloon and light bulb. This thesis argues that light and whiteness as characteristics of the symbolic objects represent evil, malignity or another dark force. I show that the color theory that ties the books together has its main genesis, for both Melville and Pynchon, in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Theory of Colors*.

## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Serafima and Poppy.  
Many thanks to my loving family for their encouragement and support.

## Table of Contents

Dedication .....	iv
I. The Mirror: The Whale and the Rocket in Context.....	1
Image Connections and Style.....	1
Dark Shades of Whiteness .....	11
II. <i>Moby-Dick</i> .....	15
Ishmael's Narration and Melville's Book.....	15
Herman Melville and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe .....	24
Light as Malign Agency of Will .....	30
III. <i>Gravity's Rainbow</i> .....	37
Reprisals of Literary Style .....	40
The Devil in the Technical Details .....	53
Evil Light and the White Man .....	63
IV. Conclusion .....	75
Endnotes .....	80
Bibliography .....	84

## Chapter I

### The Mirror: The Whale and the Rocket in Context

Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* mirrors Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. *Gravity's Rainbow* has many established parallels to *Moby-Dick*,<sup>1</sup> but it is the central claim of this thesis that Pynchon is not simply engaging with Melville, but actively reprising *Moby-Dick* for the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Pynchon responds to, and reinvents, Melville's book by formulaically mirroring major themes, central images, Melville's use of particular color theory, and Melville's profuse use of technical language to express coded spiritual beliefs. In this thesis, I will argue that Pynchon's novel mirrors Melville's on many levels, such as: 1. establishing a direct semiotic link between the central images of the white whale and the German V2 rocket, 2. identifying the similarities of style in both novels, 3. examining the use of whiteness and light imagery to represent darkness, malignancy or evil in both novels, and 4. exploring how scientific terminology and technical analogies reveal the authors' beliefs through metaphysical symbolism. I will then use critical techniques and close reading to explain how the above claims are reprised from Melville by Pynchon through the use of imagery, form and style, and color theory. This framing reveals symbolic function in the literature.

### Image Connections and Style



The title of this thesis hints at the primary images that connect these novels together and that are the topic of this first chapter. The secondary focus of this chapter is the similarity between Melville's and Pynchon's idiosyncratic form and style, followed by an explanation of the dark and evil implications of white and light symbolisms in the novels. There exists an active semiotic link between Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* and Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* that is hard to ignore once established: both novels feature a giant, sublime symbol at the core of the story, in *Moby-Dick*, it is the white whale, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, it is the German V2 rocket. Every character in both novels orbits under the great gravity of these central concepts. Pynchon has reimagined Melville's monster whale as a mechanized weapon of destruction and evil intent with the invention of his Schwarzgerät, the 00000 rocket. The object is structurally and spatially the same as the whale, as is the symbolic function. The whale and the rocket have the same basic geometric shape, so they look the same (huge, three-dimensional ellipsoids with fins that spout fire or water) and function similarly as core metaphors within the life of the novels.

In both novels, the core metaphor controls life and death and is feared and revered. The sublime metaphor comes packaged as a monstrous "grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air" reimagined by Pynchon as the "white finality" looming "up in the zero sky" (Melville 7; Pynchon 85, 87). Both rocket and whale are giants. Both are hunter and the hunted<sup>2</sup>, and are hydro- and aerodynamic, designed specifically to move swiftly and with great power. These sublime godhead symbols occupy the liminal territory of blue sky or blue sea and continuously threaten each character with death and destruction, ceaselessly, and for the duration of the novel. There is a feeling in the novels

that an attack may come at any time, from any direction. The ideas of critics Edward Mendelson and Andrzej Kopcewicz frame the many ways in which the central metaphors of both novels are brought to life by their authors through form and style.

Understanding the literary form of these novels highlights the way the central metaphors operate. The white whale and V2 rocket act like a thematic center to the often-chaotic stylistic structure of the plot's organization. *Gravity's Rainbow* mirrors *Moby-Dick*'s form and stylistic structure, which is vast and loose with many digressions. Very few novels from the world's literary canon have been identified by literary critics as "encyclopedic," and the two here discussed are the only examples from American literature, according to Edward Mendelson's 1976 essay "Encyclopedic Narrative: From Dante to Pynchon." Mendelson's assertion is that both novels belong in a special, separate genre of the world literature rubric that he identifies as the "Encyclopedic Narrative" on account of their numerous similarities. Mendelson makes "clear the importance of the genre" he has discovered by "naming its members. [He knows] of only seven: Dante's *Commedia*, Rabelais' five books of Gargantua and Pantagruel, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Goethe's *Faust*, Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, and now [...] Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*" (1267). Mendelson's apt recognition sets the novels apart from other examples from the lush American literary canon, establishing a close stylistic kinship through unusual, idiosyncractic formal approaches.

While Mendelson's article lacks depth and doesn't address the similarities of particular characters or their symbolic functions, it remains pertinent because it creates a new way of considering what the deeply rich and multi-faceted novels have in common on a formalistic, imagistic and historical level. To wit, they are both "encyclopedic"

American novels, standalones in Mendelson's new genre. The reader will encounter within their pages songs, recipes, psychedelic visions, scientific details, and many other indirect meanderings away from conventional plot development and action. Both *Moby-Dick* and *Gravity's Rainbow* are great repositories of technical know-how on many broad topics, such as on whaling, the fishing industry, employment of tools, mathematics, global politics, plastics manufacture and the engineering minutiae of rocketry and ballistics technology.

Andrzej Kopcewicz's essay "The rocket and the whale: Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's rainbow* and *Moby-Dick*" engages with Mendelson's earlier claims and substantiates the "Encyclopedic Narrative" idea, providing a strong critical backdrop to this thesis. While in Mendelson, the hypothesis was outlined and briefly defended, in Kopcewicz it grows and develops into a substantiated claim. Kopcewicz writes:

Even a cursory reading of *Gravity's rainbow* [sic] will reveal striking similarities with *Moby-Dick* – not only in the function of its central metaphor – but also in its teleologically presented reality, its admixture of fact and fantasy, the baroque language, use of colour symbolism, Yankee humour, myth and mythography, magic and ritual, and finally in its method of linking images into one integral, autotelic whole. [...] The themes of both novels evolve from their central metaphors – the Whale and the Rocket – which function as the unifying principles in the organization of their plots. The proper understanding of each novel will depend therefore upon the function and the role of these metaphors. (37).

Cataloging the many points of overlap, Kopcewicz makes a convincing argument for the authors' ability to weave primary images "into one integral, autotelic whole" (37). The fact that these central images dictate the movements and meanings of the novels set them apart from most other literary works. Without being able to grasp what the prime metaphors mean, the reader is at a loss as to the meaning of the book. This claim supports

the semiotic link of whale and rocket as the primary symbols at work in the books, and, further, it establishes the importance of said symbol to the way all aspects of the plots intersect and encircle the symbol at the novels' center. The whale and rocket exude *gravity*, and all of the fictional characters respond to its power. Beyond the function of the central images, Kopewitz and Mendelson make comparisons to the stylistic choices of both authors, such as their play on conventional plot form, technical overtures and profuse use of epigraphs and historical quotations. Mendelson's "Encyclopedic Narrative" genre hypothesis offers a novel vantage point from which to view the connective symbolism around which the themes of both books orbit. Mendelson writes, "Encyclopedic narrative identifies itself not by a single plot or structure, but by encompassing a broad set of qualities. All include a full account of a technology or science", as these two novels clearly do (1270).

Lawrence Buell argues more recently in *The Dream of the Great American Novel* that "[*Gravity's Rainbow*] comes so close to seeming a twentieth-century reinvention of *Moby-Dick* that the rest of this chapter could easily be given over to the ways the one book reprises the other" (428). Although Buell writes at length on the topic, he does not acknowledge the entire linkage between the two novels, concluding that "*Gravity's Rainbow's* text gives no overt sign" of referencing Melville (428). This thesis argues Buell's conclusion; the established central symbols are precisely that sign in physical shape, in function and in implied symbolism. Overt or subtle, many such signs are distinctly present in Pynchon and this thesis is laying the framework to show how, precisely, Thomas Pynchon reimagines *Moby-Dick* 122 years later.

Buell is sensitive to many thematic overlaps, but fails to bring the thrust of

meaning full circle. He mistakenly links Pynchon's rocket, poised above the Orpheus theatre in Los Angeles at the end of the novel, as being symbolically the same as the rocket containing Gottfried inside of it; it certainly is not. Instead, the rocket at the end of the book is the prophesized "personal Rocket", meant for the reader (727). Pynchon invents an elaborate scheme with his writing in which the rocket at the end of the book is the reader's personal tool of annihilation, which will be discussed in detail further on. Buell also mistakes Ishmael's occasional mocking tones for elaborate intellectual "put-ons" when they're actually survival mechanisms (366). Buell points specifically to Ishmael's "pseudo-Linnaean taxonomy of the various species of whales according to size via the metaphor of bibliography (folio whales, octavo whales, etc. [...])" (366). However, the categorizations are, for Ishmael, neither mockery nor hoax, as he explains much later in the book:

Since I have undertaken to manhandle this Leviathan, it behoves me to approve myself omnisciently exhaustive in the enterprise; not overlooking the minutest seminal germs of his blood, and spinning him out to the uttermost coil of his bowels [...] Applied to any other creature than the Leviathan—to an ant or a flea—such portly terms might justly be deemed unwarrantably grandiloquent. But when Leviathan is the text, the case is altered (465).

It can be evidenced in this passage that Ishmael's academic esteem for his subject is sincere, as fictional author of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael tries to be "omnisciently exhaustive in [his] enterprise", and he means it in earnest (465). Ishmael's aims are not to neglect any tiny part of the whale because, what would serve as treatise for a smaller animal, would not suffice for his beloved whale. Categorizing the whales as he does, Ishmael shows that he loves whales in the same way he loves books. Buell also interprets the novels in tandem as "post-war allegories" which reduces the symbolism down to that "hideous and

intolerable” allegorical inquiry that Ishmael rails against (Buell 430; Melville 208). The thoughtful discussion offered by Buell on many intersections is often insightful and nuanced, and yet his depth of scope makes his oversights all the more blatant.

Having established the links, it is important to point out that there are, of course, modifications between Melville’s sublime whale and Pynchon’s technological-god rocket, which is the white whale reimagined as the “white finality” presiding over the heights from “up in the zero sky” (Pynchon 85, 87). The endings and metaphysical thrust of the novel’s upshot are different. Nature triumphs in *Moby-Dick* over the will of man: the white whale consumes Ahab and sinks the *Pequod*. Ahab’s vengeful obsession gets transmuted into Ishmael’s intellectual obsession. This obsession turns into a new *scholarly* hunt for all things whale, as Ishmael tries to deal with the trauma of having been the sole survivor of the adventure. His telling the tale after the fact, with many technical, cetological interjections and divergent points of obsessive interest, becomes the book, *Moby-Dick*. Ishmael is read as the fictional author of the novel.

In this thesis Melville’s novel is understood as a trauma narrative, or a survivor’s narrative, as outlined in the thesis work of Janet Reno, titled *Ishmael Alone Escaped: “Moby-Dick” as a Survivor’s Narrative*. Chapter II explores this form of storytelling in detail and contextualizes the symbolic function of the central metaphor. However, In Pynchon, evil triumphs at the end and the corrupt will of man supersedes the balance of nature: “God’s indifferent sunlight” is illustrated by Pynchon “in all of its bleaching and terror” (364). The evil whiteness spreads to continue the pursuit of world domination via the international rocket cartel, thus elevating the central rocket metaphor to god-hood. Pynchon’s narrator is, likewise, traumatized from what he knows of the future and can

only think to invite us to sing a wicked song to the new, mechanized, artificial rocket-god construct, by the end of the novel. This establishes a continuity of ideas that grows in complexity from the publication of *Moby-Dick* in 1851 to 1973 when *Gravity's Rainbow* reprises it with a post-war mentality, just as the modern psyche grows in complexity to approximate its social constructs.

The central metaphor symbolized in *Moby-Dick* is animal in nature; for Pynchon, it is an artificially manufactured weapon. Even Ahab's artificial limb is animal in nature, it is whale ivory (126), so the monster inside Ahab's heart is already part whale<sup>3</sup> by the start of the story, and so, yearns to join that force behind the pasteboard masks, that inspired his "wild vindictiveness against the whale" (186). In *Gravity's Rainbow*, the ancient human urge to deify animals is being subverted and reimagined by Pynchon into a new, post-industrialist form of idolatry: the fetishization of mechanized rocketry and the deification of mental scientific processes that are required for its engineering. With the example of a horse Pynchon writes, "heathen Germans who lived here sacrificed horses once, in their old ceremonies. Later the horse's role changed from holy offering to servant of power" (749). This is Pynchon's paranoid warning for humanity not to become slaves to technology, or else our fate is sealed. Technology and brainpower are the superlative concepts in *Gravity's Rainbow*; science is the new gospel. Pynchon utilizes this formula in each of his published works (to lesser or greater extents) and these efforts culminate in the ambitious nature of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Through *Gravity's Rainbow* he flexes his beliefs and extends Melville's central metaphors with a darker sensibility in which the balance of nature is not restored by the end of the novel, but rather, superseded.

Pynchon continues to mirror Melville via characterization of plot action and the

concept of man *inside* the sublime symbol of rocket and whale. Vengeance is the driving principle of the plot action in *Moby-Dick*. It is the force behind Captain Ahab's suicidal quest to either kill the whale or join it in the depths. Ahab is attempting to sublimate himself, scientifically, by going from a solid state to godly gas, by becoming a part of the whale. He succeeds at this, becoming a sort of neo-Jonah, in the belly of the whale, although presumably dead. Ahab *in* the whale is the precursor image to Gottfried *in* the rocket, another willing self-sacrifice at the close of Pynchon's plot. Gottfried is the Aryan youth playing the part of willing human sacrifice, but he is also symbolic of a seed (sperm) inside the big rocket phallus trying to impregnate the future with its influence; this is quite different from Ahab's quest for personal sublimation. However, a further link on the resonant subject of human sacrifice can be heard in echo with Ishmael's imploring "For God's sake, be economical with your lamps and candles! not a gallon you burn, at least one drop of man's blood was spilled for it" when offering proof that whaling is a deadly profession (208). Blood in whale blubber is akin to blood in plastic and steel. *Gravity's Rainbow* also engages the idea of vengeance in another sense, by simply acknowledging the name of the primary symbol in the text, the German V2 rocket. V2 stands for Vergeltungswaffen, German for "vengeance weapon," the first precursor to modern guided missiles, operating at speeds breaking the barrier of sound<sup>4</sup>. Both Gottfried and Ahab are willing participants in a sacrificial act in a vengeance myth.

The two primary symbolisms, the whale and the rocket, are fueled, metaphorically, with vengeance. These novels are operating with the concept of vengeance built into the hunter/hunted relationship playing out through characterization and plot. Thus, the mythography of meaning is, again, similar in both books. The hunter



is actively seeking its prey, meanwhile projecting manias onto that which it hunts. By trying to destroy these sinister attributes, the hunter is actually willfully trying to destroy them within himself, in the working of his own psyche and the evil urges present therein. With Ahab in the role of the hunter, we can suppose that once the hunter is vanquished, the hunted (here, the whale) is absolved of all the supernatural attributes hitherto attached to it by the hunter, since they were only ever projections of the obsessed mind, bent on “supernatural revenge” (188). The hunted (whale) may then return to the realm of the natural and continue its mundane life. Thus Moby Dick, the fish<sup>5</sup>, is never heard from again, as he has returned to the natural realm where an animal is just an animal, no longer a godhead incarnate, supposedly acting willfully with evil agency. The natural balance is restored. The whole time, throughout *Moby-Dick*, it can be surmised that Ahab was the aberration of nature, not the whale. This issue of myth structure is more faceted in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

Tyrone Slothrop encounters divinity at the crux of the novel atop the Brocken mountain with a witch, Geli Tripping, for a guide. Instead of utilizing this pivotal moment to channel his energies toward his sublime quest, Slothrop profanes the moment by engaging in silliness, sexual innuendo and irreverently raising his arm in Nazi salute. After this ritual moment in the book, Slothrop has lost personal agency and is an entropic tool in the story. As he nears learning the truth about his own victimhood within a sinister past<sup>6</sup>, he gets lost in comic-type adventures, loses footing on reality and succumbs to entropy in post-war Europe without resolving his issues. He is a traumatized character, as many in the novel are (mirroring Ishmael, likewise traumatized). By coming too close to solving the mystery of his own past as a behaviorist conditioning experiment subject

aboard the ship *Anubis*, Slothrop is unable to continue his initial quest and ends up endlessly sidetracked in a continuous loop. He is almost castrated, which would be a logical ending to his story. Instead, he only narrowly escapes, then fades out of the novel, fated to play the part of the victim. By proxy, Gottfried ends up in the role of the human sacrifice to cement the supremacy of villainous Captain Weissmann via triumphed vengeance (his Vergeltungswaffen) and to ensure his future successes. The concept of whiteness as representing dark themes is echoed in Gottfried's funeral vestments, which are described as his "bridal costume" at the launching of the 00000 rocket: "golden hairs on his back, alloyed German gold, pale yellow to white, run symmetric about his spine [...] He is gagged with a white kid glove. Weissmann has engineered all the symbolism today" (750). Evil does triumph in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the implications being subverted and presented in an alternate way from that within *Moby-Dick*. It is as if Captain Ahab had succeeded at slaughtering the whale, sacrificed his entire crew, and, having won his vengeance, maniacally reintegrated with the world to tackle larger stakes.

### Dark Shades of Whiteness

Another facet of similarity between the novels is in their use of light imagery. This thesis identifies the fact that both *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Moby-Dick* represent light as dark or malign force. A brief list of general concordance is useful to illustrate the proliferation of this idea: Moby Dick, the bloodthirsty whale, is white, monomaniacal Captain Ahab is described as having a huge "lividly whitish"<sup>7</sup> scar across his face, a white ivory leg and a white ivory stool to sit upon, Weissmann, the main villain in *Gravity's Rainbow*, is literally "white man" when translated from the German, Byron the Bulb is an immortal light bulb incarnation of Dracula the vampire, European (white)

colonization of (black) Africa is shown as evil, the Nazi (white) persecution of Jews (considered as non-white by Nazis) is part of the political background of World War II, and many other terse examples. It is clear that for both *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Moby-Dick* there is an inherent tension between overt representations of whiteness/light and the sinister characteristics implied. Many forms of light and whiteness are thus addressed, from the racial spectrum to symbolic attributes of humans and objects, natural or artificial.

In *Moby-Dick*, the white whale is brimming with symbolic meaning ranging the gambit from ethereal sublimity, a *tabula rasa* construct, a mirror, a ghost, a god, the vastness of the Milky Way cosmos, among others. Although in the Western literary tradition light is typically associated with holiness and goodness, here light and pure white symbology is a far more complicated issue. It is my contention that quite the opposite of the usual symbolic light/dark associations are true. White is a lack of color, a “dumb blankness full of meaning” (Melville 198), while black is the absorption of all color simultaneously along the perceived color spectrum. I argue that lightness and brightness is a multi-faceted literary construction that is complex in its semiotic attribution but easy to discern once recognized: light and whiteness represents a “colorless, all-color of atheism” (Melville 198) and, therefore, evil human willpower.

This charged polarity of symbolism is precisely why the characters Ishmael and Slothrop are performing the reflective or interpretive role, responding to the characters imbued with the agency of light (obsessed Captains Weissmann and Ahab). Ishmael and Slothrop are seeking information, or *enlightenment*; both become obsessed with their topic in turn (the sublime symbol of white whale and rocket) and chase it throughout the

most liminal spheres. The liminal symbolisms of the borderless seas in Melville and Pynchon's borderless Zone are perfect counterparts where myriad multi-cultural characters can interact in a unique way otherwise inaccessible through a more conventional socio-political forum. In these liminal areas, "[t]here are no zones [...] No zones but the Zone" (Pynchon 333). This is a strong background arena or thematic landscape which informs both *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Moby-Dick* and supplies another powerful resonance between them. Alternately, the symbolic whiteness can mean transitional states, the energy of morphing from one form to another. These observations are not reserved only for *Moby-Dick* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, either—the concept of whiteness and light, in fact, has a literary tradition in the United States of representing the very opposite of godliness, goodness or enlightenment<sup>8</sup>.

It may seem counterintuitive on the surface, but writing darkness into lightness, as it were, is a skillful method for the author to play within the reader's preconceptions and established norms within the Western literary tradition.<sup>9</sup> American authors have often wrought complex themes by establishing light within their works as something intrinsically darker than goodness; for example, light has been known to appear as an agent of moral judgment, harmful illusion or even cruelty that necessitates change. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, for instance, presents the reader with the power of light acting as agent of moral requirement, casting the characters of the novel in varying tones of shadow or brightness and marking them visually.<sup>10</sup> Light in Hawthorne's work is less of a natural occurrence and more of a supernatural, moral judgment of character. In F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, light obscures the truth behind a glittering veil of sentimental illusion, acting as a false lull of fairytale artifice in a world

where the hard facts are that bad people do bad things, whatever their socio-economic footing.<sup>11</sup> Light can also play a multi-faceted destructive/creative role, as it does in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. In Ellison's novel, light and electricity are both the force behind the narrator's nightmare formative experiences and the path to a spiritual self-reliance and socio-political iconoclasm<sup>12</sup>. This concept resonates closely with Pynchon's "Story of Byron the Bulb" (647). Byron is an immortal light bulb that has existed long enough to have developed a callous notion of humanity's control systems and their agenda. He has even begun to take on characteristics of prophecy and counterrevolutionary ideals, like an electric activist. Kinship to Melville's sinister attributes of whiteness present in nature can be found in Robert Frost's 1922 poem *Design*, to take an example from American poetry,<sup>13</sup> wherein the horror of nature is made all the more sinister by being represented by a white spider perched atop a white flower, ensnaring a white moth. The lesson seems to be: even if you and your surroundings are spotless and white as the purest snow, so your foe shall be, as nature is crafty enough for such elaborate contrivances. The very same themes clearly resonate in both Melville and Pynchon.

## Chapter II

### *Moby-Dick*

The central aim of this chapter is to set up the ways that this thesis understands Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, which Thomas Pynchon reimagines through his writing of *Gravity's Rainbow*. *Moby-Dick* itself is a giant whale, and the whale itself is a sort of giant book, which can be evidenced in Ishmael's categorizing types of whales according to their size and physical attributes in Chapter 32, *Cetology*. Not only are book and whale giant, they are both annotated with marks, glyphs and insights into their long histories; the book and the omnipresent idea of the central whale within it are objects linked in a symbolic dialog. The literary style is circular, the end result of the plot action of the book leads to the beginning, which is the attempt of Ishmael to tell his story. *Moby-Dick* is a love song to a whale. The argument of this chapter is two-fold: the first section establishes Ishmael as the purposeful, fictional narrator of Melville's book, and the second section discusses the relevance of Melville's choice for making his whale white and relates the discussion to color theory rooted in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

### Ishmael's Narration and Melville's Book

Ishmael is the fictional author of *Moby-Dick*. The literary form of *Moby-Dick* is circular to reveal that the events recounted by Ishmael have occurred in the past. Ishmael is the narrator, annotator and protagonist of the story. His is the story that unfolds some

years after the sinking of the *Pequod*.<sup>14</sup> Ishmael's narrative voice is separate from that of Melville's own. The two have different motivations and concerns and, of course, one is fictional. Ishmael's narration and formalistic approaches reveal a deep, metaphysical message of love from the subtext of the book.

Melville's coded spiritual philosophy emerges through Ishmael's narration, but Ishmael's obsessions are the character's own. I argue that one of Melville's most important stylistic decisions in the writing of this novel is to set up Ishmael as the fictional author and allowing him to tell the tale of his survival. The way Ishmael tells his story is fragmented, unfolding slowly and spliced with many technical and cetological chapters. He doesn't often step out and reveal himself explicitly from behind his narrative, but when he does he names himself clearly as a "whale author" who "stagger[s] to this enterprise [of writing *Moby-Dick*] under the weightiest words of the dictionary" (465). Ishmael also offers the reader brief glimpses of his life after the shipwreck but prior to his writing of the book. For Ishmael, in this capacity of being understood as the narrator and fictional author of *Moby-Dick*, the book he writes may as well have been bound in whale skin and printed with whale blubber, it is so full of the animal. In fact, Ishmael himself can be seen as a symbolic first draft of the book as, since his survival of the *Pequod* shipwreck disaster, he has tattooed his whole body with whale facts and other ephemera.<sup>15</sup> Ishmael is a methodical storyteller; he mirrors Melville (necessarily) and also regurgitates Ahab's light-infused obsessive action and reports back the book *Moby-Dick*. Ishmael himself is the instrument through which Ahab's hatred for the whale turns to love. Ahab's vengeance quest turns into Ishmael's scholarly endeavor.

Ahab's obsession with the whale is transferred to Ishmael when the *Pequod* is sunk and Ahab is killed. Ishmael in turn obsesses about whales through his particular, scholarly lens and comes to understand and love them through immersion. In this way Ishmael is able to transmute hate alchemically into love by way of understanding, which is Melville's spiritual message of the book. Ahab is characterized as an agent of willpower—right or wrong. He is the cause, the action, agency and driving force of the plot action, while Ishmael occupies the observational and narrative capacity. Ishmael is reflecting Ahab's willpower through observation, philosophic speculation and narration, namely by writing the book itself. Ahab's mania drives the plot action and Ishmael's interests can be witnessed in the scientific and scholarly inquiries into whaling and cetology, the etymology that opens the book, and the deep sense of lineage of information propagation.

Ishmael recounts the Ahab-driven plot and regurgitates for the reader not only what happens to him and how, but also what it means to him through his long philosophic ponderings. Since he is the lone survivor of the shipwreck of the *Pequod*, his tale is a survivor's narrative. This thesis picks up where Janet Reno left off in 1983 with her thesis work titled, *Ishmael Alone Escaped: "Moby-Dick" as a Survivor's Narrative*. I agree with Reno's basic reading of *Moby-Dick*, but while she veers off to connect the fragmented stages of a survivor's stages of healing, my work seeks to express the metaphysical message of the novel itself, which is coded by Melville and not superficially apparent. Reno states her claims:

We must [...] be willing to see Ishmael as distinct from his creator. In *Moby-Dick* the survivor is Ishmael, not Melville, and the one who recounts the book is again Ishmael, not Melville. Accepting this



proposition requires a departure from a critical tradition which has tended to see creator and creation as inexorably and perpetually joined. (Reno, 1)

This departure from more typical modes of literary criticism<sup>16</sup> is an important distinction, and will frame the pivotal points of this thesis. Reno takes a psychological approach to develop her work, understanding *Moby-Dick* as a book that Ishmael must write in order to deal with his survivor's guilt and deep trauma in order to heal himself and become a functioning member of society again. While I disagree with her assertion that Ishmael's main reason for writing the book is "to recover psychic and emotional wholeness" (5) and the upshot of Reno's perspective pertaining to Ishmael's motivations, many of my general assumptions about the structure of the fiction are concurrent with Reno's work. She is especially astute in pointing out how Ishmael engages the reader directly at least two times in the novel, stepping aside from the narrative action and directly and self-consciously referring to 'you the reader' in your present tense:

"Call me Ishmael" focuses attention on the present tense, the time during which not the events of the Pequod but the event of telling itself will occur. We observe Ishmael at work, telling his story now. "Friends, hold my arms," Ishmael says at one point (p. 379). He means us, the readers, as his friends. And he means now. (Reno, 6)

In these two instances, Ishmael is able to call attention to his narrating and writing of his story and deepen the emotional value of the textual content through the action of the telling. This aberrant narrative technique brings the reader into Ishmael's storytelling in a profound way and involves the reader in Ishmael's emotional retelling of his tale. In fact, he claims the book as his own in the very first line: "Call me Ishmael" (2). This famous opening line from literature actually provides clues to how the book should be understood; it is clear that Ishmael is meant as the author. Also, he refers to himself as "a whale author" and asks for "a condor's quill" and "Vesuvius' crater for an inkstand" to

recount his tale (465). These are small distinctions, but important ones. As Ishmael reaches out from the pages in this way, the reader gets a sense of how much he needs to tell his story. He is deeply invested in his tale but does not directly speak the meaning behind his accomplishment. His love of whales, even after the trauma inflicted upon him, is evidenced in his prolific attendance to them. It is the very cataloging, annotating and obsessing about whales that is the coded proof of love for them. As Ishmael himself instructs, “Read it if you can” (358). Again, he is reaching out to the reader with specific instructions as to how to approach his narrative.

There is a metaphysical transmutation taking place through Ishmael’s telling of his story, not so much a psychological, self-centered one, as in Reno’s understanding of what the novel is about. I argue that Ishmael inherits, or is possessed by, Ahab’s obsession for the whale when he survives the shipwreck, because he is so traumatized by it and the events that the obsession had caused. This Ishmael himself admits by writing, “A wild, mystical, sympathetical feeling was in me; Ahab’s quenchless feud seemed mine” (180). This passage can be simply read as Ishmael being drawn into Ahab’s “closing vortex” through herd mentality induced by the Captain’s charisma, but, as Ishmael is recounting all events *post facto*, it can also allude to his retrospective musings (577, epi).

Ishmael inherits the obsession, but because Ishmael is an intellectual, as he relates it “a schoolmaster” by trade (5), the vengeance quest is morphed into a scholarly quest. Ishmael is on a sublime quest to understand his fate. Reno explains the process through which the reader can see brief explanations throughout *Moby-Dick* that illuminate how Ishmael’s obsession eventually leads to his writing the book (though she doesn’t see it as

obsession, or as inherited from Ahab). She writes, “In *Moby-Dick*, the reader is presented with rather few glimpses of how Ishmael had been during the period between the sinking of the Pequod and the day when he sat down to write his story— but each of the glimpses we do get suggests disorientation, strange behavior, [and] craziness” (2). Reno points out how the reader gets a sense of Ishmael as being damaged, as one who is “seeking to understand the chaos of what he has lived through” (2). After the shipwreck, Ishmael has searched the dry and watery world over to try and make sense of what happened to him.

Reno points out:

He has searched in etymology, [...] has worked in libraries, researching the whale in history and literature, and has also searched through the "long Vaticans and street stalls of the earth" for information about whales (p. 2). He has talked to men who had, first-hand, experienced whaling disasters (p. 180). He has even sought to verify the fabulous aspects of the whale fishery by returning to the whaling life himself. (Reno, 2).

In other words, Ishmael has spent all of his time post shipwreck trying to gain understanding. He has searched for answers in books as well as in real life practicum. The culminations of all of his efforts become the book itself. When he understands the whale, he comes to love it, and he comes to understand the whale piecemeal, which is how he tells his story.

Ishmael’s *Moby-Dick* is a testament of his past, as well as a testament of his understanding and love of the creatures that traumatized him so. Because Ishmael is obsessed with whales, he searches the world over to collect all available knowledge of whales, collects it, studies it, tattoos it on himself to the point where there’s little blank room left on his body<sup>17</sup> (in essence becoming part whale himself, as Ahab was with his whale ivory limb), and, in the end, is able to find deep love for the animal, transmuting

Ahab's hatred once and for all. Ishmael's attempts at finding a "secure way of preserving such valuable statistics" (461) are vital to his stepping forth as a survivor of the wreck to tell the tale, as he explains in the Epilogue (577). This is evidence of Ishmael's spiritual transmutation from hate into love, no small feat. This metaphysical alchemy is achieved through Ishmael's interpretive quality, scholastic and experiential endeavors post-shipwreck, and finally through the fictional writing of the book. Once the reader is familiar with the voice of Ishmael, it becomes easy to discern his special touch; his hand is evidenced on the title of the book, and the peculiar, scholarly way in which the book opens.

*Moby-Dick :Or, The Whale* is a perfect title for Ishmael's book, it offers two distinct framings of the animal and allows the reader a choice as to how they'll perceive the sublime metaphor of the tale. Moby Dick, as named entity, has agency, personality and even willpower, as a character might. When just seen as "The Whale", he is just a natural creature of the sea. The novel opens with an Etymology, "supplied by a late consumptive usher to a grammar school" and Extracts, "supplied by a sub-sub-librarian" (viii-ix). The tensions that permeate the text later in the story are already at play, symbolically, in the Etymology. Typically, when a book begins with lengthy, historical citations, the purpose is to insert the book into a vein of knowledge or lineage on its subject. So Ishmael's choice to begin this way clearly is meant to affix the text permanently within a lineage of scholarship on whales, a self-aggrandizing gesture. However, when the sources are cited as being attributed to "a sub-sub-librarian" or "a late consumptive usher to a grammar school", the reader is meant to pause and question the merit of such citation (viii-ix). Ishmael's purposeful humor and wit play with these

tensions with great finesse. Part adventure tale, part “veritable gospel cetology”, the novel is ultimately commenting on its own content, both undermining and elevating at once (ix). The same is true for the Epilogue of the book, where first is a quote from Job reading “And I only am escaped alone to tell thee” and then Ishmael’s poetic close to his epic (577).

If the novel were not being understood for the purposeful, layered narrative supplied, after the fact, by Ishmael, it would lack the metaphysical construction and Ahab’s hate would never be transmuted into the love of whales that Ishmael obviously possesses, as it takes a lot of love to write a book as full of the animal as *Moby-Dick*. It might also be difficult to understand the stylistic form of Melville’s book without needing to look past all of the jarring flights into seemingly discordant cetology and technical minutiae. It would stand irreconcilable and without having a central message beyond something quite trite, like ‘don’t quest with revenge in your heart’.

Since Ishmael is the fictional author of the book, he is consciously aware of how his story ends, and lets this knowledge slip many times into the text. Lawrence Buell clearly loves the book, yet his criticism cannot seem to reconcile the book’s idiosyncrasies. Buell sees Melville’s imperfections as a necessary byproduct of disorganized storytelling. “*Moby-Dick*’s continual straining toward horizons of possibility that no actual book could hope to encompass becomes one of its marks of distinction,” writes Buell, “not despite but because of such admissions of necessary imperfection” (364). Another issue for Buell, who is reading *Moby-Dick* as a linear story, is that the book’s tragic ending is being presaged many times in the text itself, right from Chapter 1, *Loomings*. Buell notices that the same is true in the Extracts section as well:

“[Ishmael’s analysis of the painting at the Spouter Inn] is the first in a series of umpteen rehearsals for the endgame—which for that matter was the thrust of the prefatory “Extracts” too: an incremental series of inadequate approximations, sometimes ludicrously off base, of what eventually gets revealed, sort of” (366). Buell’s is clearly an incomplete view of the book’s form and a distorted sense of what it is trying to communicate. What is actually going on is that Ishmael is narrating the story *post facto*, and seeing the endgame reflexively in every story he relays.

If there was ever an argument for Ishmael having already lived out his adventure and the book *Moby-Dick* then being his attempt at recounting it after the fact, it is his ability to presage the coloring of the central whale in the very first chapter of the novel. Somehow, prior to even enlisting as crew for the *Pequod*, Ishmael refers to the particular white whale, “two and two there floated into my inmost soul, endless processions of the whale, and, midmost of them all, one grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air” (7). What other white colored whale but Moby Dick would float in his soul, a white visage resembling a snow covered hill? What Buell and many other critics are objecting to is that *Moby-Dick*’s plot is constantly referencing itself in a meta-fashion and often twisting without warning into seemingly unrelated, ephemeral passages for the purpose of interjecting Ishmael’s intellectualized account of what transpired aboard the *Pequod*. The interjections are necessary because without them Ishmael would not be able to convey his love of whales, adequately present what had happened to him and would be unable to tell the tale—which, in reality, stands for the finished product *Moby-Dick*. The book acts like an annotated and self-referential account of an adventure, by one who seeks to make the account most lofty and veritable.

## Herman Melville & Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

The metaphysical properties ascribed to Moby Dick elevate the natural mammal to a sublime status, starting with his coloring. But, rather than being the “vague, nameless horror concerning him [...] so mystical and well nigh ineffable” (189) that Ishmael is reluctant to express, the whiteness of the whale is in fact a calculated scientific enquiry into aesthetic color theory that Herman Melville was well aware of, taken in significant part from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Theory of Colors* (1810). This idea is recounted by Michaela Giesenkirchen in her 2005 article, “*Still Half Blending with the Blue of the Sea*”: *Goethe’s Theory of Colors in Moby-Dick*<sup>18</sup>. In this Chapter the distinction between Ishmael’s fictional writing of *Moby-Dick* and Melville’s actual writing of it becomes pertinent yet again. The motivations of actual author and fictional author are different.

The near-scientific color theory concepts taken from Goethe imbue the white whale, and the liminal blue seas surrounding him, with a methodical treatment by Melville. The fact that Melville uses a nearly *scientific* mode of inquiry for the treatment of colors to employ throughout his novel cements my hypothesis that the scientific and technical aspects of *Moby-Dick* hold the deepest spiritual resonances. Ishmael tells us that he dreads the whiteness of Moby Dick, and that he is lulled into philosophizing by the blue waters because, “as every one knows, meditation and water are wedded for ever” (3). This is precisely the effect Melville wants those colors to have on the reader; it is a formulaic foray into human psychology and the way colors interact within it.

The fact that the whiteness of the whale is the primary association with him visually points to the concept of sublimity. Goethe has discovered sublimity to be a prime

factor of whiteness and Melville employs this principle in his book in several meaningful ways. Giesenkirchen explains how Melville is utilizing Goethe's *Theory of Colors* via his characters' relationships with the colors:

Engaging in contemplations on the “moral-sensual effect” of whiteness encountered in nature as well as on the mark that this effect has left on human systems of signification, Ishmael makes the symbolic method his own theme—a poetic self-reflection that, as has been hinted, had already inspired Goethe's *Theory of Colors*. It is precisely with respect to the symbolic interpretation of whiteness that Melville pursues, [...] namely self-conscious, Goethean symbolism to its radical consequences (14).

“Symbolistic interpretation” is the method being employed to convey the meaning of the whale's whiteness (14). Ishmael's response to Moby Dick's whiteness is Melville's methodology and reason for employing it. Giesenkirchen is sensitive to the narrative form of *Moby-Dick* when she points out that Ishmael chooses to narrate often in a “symbolistic” manner but she, too, lumps Ishmael and Melville into one narrative genus, making no distinction between Ishmael's reflexive reactions to the colors at play, and Melville's purposeful use of them. Ishmael's imbued regurgitation of Goethe is a sign that Melville has read and digested the material, and writes Ishmael as the expresser of the inherent philosophy of it. Much has already been said as to *why* a study into the use of white is important, here let us focus on *how*:

Goethe found that whiteness designated the first and last, the purest and simplest degree of physical existence, marking substances and objects on the verge of losing their physicality or visibility. Therefore, he believed, in its “gesteigerte” (intensified) existence as a natural pigment, whiteness pointed immediately to no-thingness in thingness, to spirit suffusing matter. This thought takes on monstrous proportions in the image of the white whale, as quasi-spiritual whiteness (which both in Melville and Goethe may positively signify “whatever is sweet, honorable, and sublime”) inheres the most impressive of masses, the bulk of a monster, likened to “a snow-hill in the air” (Giesenkirchen 14).



This “verge” sets the whale apart from other natural creatures of the sea because the whale is being presented as a supernatural “no-thingness in thingness”, which should be a misnomer, but is actually a symbolic spirituality (14). For Ishmael (and Goethe) whiteness is the visual modality representing the “spirit suffusing matter” (14). Goethe’s interpretations of the color white fit Ishmael’s descriptions of rumors about the whale: “morbid hints, and half-formed foetal suggestions of supernatural agencies, which [...] invested Moby Dick with new terrors unborrowed from anything that visibly appears” (182). That is to say, people were making the whale into a monster without any basis of reality. This is the case, at least partly, due to the whale’s fantastic coloring. Here the whale is not being vilified, what is being highlighted by Ishmael is that the humans are propagating the ill will. This idea was developed by Goethe and incorporated by Melville. Giesenkirchen establishes the heritage of ideas:

Goethe seeks truth. Truth therefore is never absolute but always needs to validate itself through both intuition and experience. Goethe argues against Newton’s theory that light potentially contains all colors within itself by stressing that our experience proves whiteness to be not possibly a compound of all colors. Paradoxically, it is this very thought that the experience of whiteness supplied the most immediate impression of the “great principle of light” itself that leads Ishmael to embrace Newtonian ideas and to imagine the world as a “palsied universe” lying “before us a leper” [...] Ishmael bases his eventual speculation that colors, or meanings, are but “subtle deceits,” not “inherent in substances,” on a Goethean, universal, symbolistic intuition: “no man can deny that in its profoundest idealized significance [whiteness] calls up a peculiar apparition to the soul”. (15)

Experience is here claimed as a fundamental truth of the nature of light and whiteness. Humans do not experience white as a totality of all colors, and so Goethe found himself arguing with Newtonian ideas. This is what Ishmael attempts to express when he explains why the feeling of Moby Dick’s whiteness felt so utterly terrifying to him. What

Giesenkirchen points out is that whiteness, or the Goethean truth of the meaning of whiteness, is read as being a lie. Ishmael understands it as such on an instinctual level. In this sense, whiteness represents both the notions of potential energy almost becoming actualized through the will of the active mind considering it, and spent potential energy at the last grasp of its influence; white as almost something, and white as almost nothing, the beginning function of flow and the last movement of its ebb. The philosophical implications are that the whale is actually neither holy nor evil, he is only on the verge of becoming either concept when projected upon by an outside observer. When seen through the perspective of Captain Ahab, *Moby Dick* is an evil singularity aimed just at him (but the reality is that Ahab is the one pursuing the whale, in the active agency of the hunter). For Ishmael, who sees the whale as something appalling and sublime that he eventually learns to love, the white whale is an almost supernatural entity verging towards conceptions of the holy, based off of Ahab's strong reactions to it and his own firsthand experiences with it.

The ways in which Melville maneuvers the waters of color theory are nuanced and it seems clear that the thrust of ideas stems from Goethe. Michaela Giesenkirchen and Douglas Robillard have developed arguments deducing that the work of Goethe must have inspired his methods. It lies outside of the aims of this thesis to trace every line of thinking pointing to this theory of influence, but Robillard and Giesenkirchen's arguments are persuasive and intelligent. Giesenkirchen argues that the scholarly relationship between Melville and Goethe has much more to it "than Melville's oft-mentioned rejection of Goethe as a neo-Platonic believer in a harmonious universe would suggest" (4-5). She sets up the importance of Goethe's query:

In the *Theory of Colors*, Goethe strives to integrate his study of subjective sense perception (in the chapter on “physiological colors”) with an objective analysis of the physical world (both chemical and optical) in ways that in turn led to an elucidation of the varieties of aesthetic color experience. The work was Goethe’s most sustained endeavor to fathom the scientific potential of poetic and artistic practice as well as the intrinsic poetry of scientific theory.’ (4)

Since Goethe was, indeed, attempting to subject his human experiential aesthetic theory through the rigor associated typically with the scientific method to arrive at the truth he so fervently sought, he had to deal with the prominent scientific mores of the times; namely, Newtonian physics. For Isaac Newton, light was strictly a particle and could not, therefore, operate as a wave. Subjectivity, or the observer’s role in natural phenomena, was a largely unknown occurrence in the mainstream scientific community until recent findings in the new science of quantum mechanics was able to substantiate the importance of the observer in experiments within quantum physics.

For Goethe’s system, the observer is the prime filter through which colors and their properties were described. *Theory of Colors* depends upon the human ability to perceive, with cognitive reasoning intact, to substantiate his findings; this is aesthetic natural philosophy presented as experiential data. Since our understanding of colors and the rainbow are the products of light as understood through the prism of visible spectrum,<sup>19</sup> light and its capability of function makes an important side-note. Long after Goethe’s time, Wave-Particle duality was found to be characteristic of light and matter on the quantum level, not only for light but also including the scientifically verifiable behavior of atoms, molecules, and electrons.<sup>20</sup> Giesenkirchen explains the stakes of Goethe’s ideas:

Goethe’s polemic against Newton’s *Opticks* aims at empirically

invalidating those Newtonian conclusions that divorce human experience from scientific truth. Rejecting the objectivist stance of contemporary natural science, Goethe holds that the phenomenal world can only be comprehended as equally generated by and enacting the noumenal principle of polarity (6).

Giesenkirchen is pointing out how Goethe's beliefs that scientific principles coincided directly with human experience ran counter to prevalent Newtonian beliefs. Newton's *Opticks* employed the culturally accepted idea that the power of human experience was fundamentally unrelated to scientific laws or their functions. Goethe outright rejected Newton's claims, rather insisting on the notion of the observer's participation in the phenomenon of experience. It was not until the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that wave-particle duality and its implications and further inquiries were widely accepted by the scientific community, all this being far in the future from Goethe's lifetime (August 1749 - March 1832). I postulate that Goethe's *Theory of Colors* better fits what we know now regarding the structure of life and its scientific operations than it did in its time, even if it was written in the nomenclature of its time period. Perhaps a reevaluation of his aesthetic theories is overdue, though this branch of inquiry lies far outside the scope of this thesis. Still, a basic understanding of Melville's engagement with Goethe's scholarship will serve in the next chapter to connect deep dialectical resonances from the ideas mentioned here to Thomas Pynchon, who uses scientific principles and theories to substantiate his work. Melville's approach to the image of the white whale has been shown to stem from Goethe's *Theory of Colors*, to include a sublime and terrible blankness that the characters can then interpret for themselves, and that the symbolic use of white represents a lack of color, a "dumb blankness full of meaning" (Melville, 198). Having established the heritage of ideas, I will now explore Melville's central idea of light and whiteness as representing shadow and evil.

## Light as Malign Agency of Will

Interwoven throughout *Moby-Dick* is a dichotomy between representations of light and the sinister characteristics it implies. Many forms of light and whiteness are discussed in the novel, from the whiteness of the whale to symbolic attributes of Captain Ahab's white ivory leg and sitting stool as well as the "lividly whitish" scar on his face (126). In *Moby-Dick*, the white whale is far from typical. Albinism is a scientific aberration wherein melanin production is affected in the organism to create little or no pigment. An albino whale, even today, would be a rare and exceptional animal, set apart from what is normal or common, as far as the species is concerned. Because the logic of this thesis is to illustrate how Thomas Pynchon mirrors the themes recognized as central in *Moby-Dick*, the discussion is not meant as a stand-alone examination of Melville's epic "Encyclopedic Narrative."<sup>21</sup> Instead, the symbolic associations of whiteness and light are examined to establish a theme for how these concepts are being employed.

In Chapter 42, *The Whiteness of the Whale*, Ishmael makes a long argument for the usual associations of the color white and yet is unable to identify with the holiness it ought to represent. Instead, he is "appalled" and terrified; he intellectualizes it and feels compelled to show the reader his scholarly line of reasoning, as he is often wont to do (189). Ishmael begins: "It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me. But how can I hope to explain myself here; and yet in some dim, random way, explain myself I must, else all these chapters might be naught" (189-90). And while the explanation Ishmael attempts to arrive at is lengthy, it bears quoting in part, as the sublime nature of whiteness is expressed in a negative light, through the means of a

hypnotic catalogue, in spite of his listing the history of ideas to the contrary:

Though in many natural objects, whiteness refiningly enhances beauty, as if imparting some special virtue of its own, as in marbles, japonicas, and pearls; and though various nations have in some way recognised a certain royal pre-eminence in this hue; [...] though even in the higher mysteries of the most august religions it has been made the symbol of the divine spotlessness and power; by the Persian fire worshippers, the white forked flame being held the holiest on the altar; and in Greek mythologies, Great Jove himself being made incarnate in a snow-white bull; [...] and though among the holy pomps of the Romish faith, white is specially employed in the celebration of the Passion of our Lord; though in the Vision of St. John, white robes are given to the redeemed, and the four-and-twenty elders stand clothed in white before the great white throne, and the Holy One that sitteth there white like wool; yet for all these accumulated associations, with whatever is sweet, and honorable, and sublime, there yet lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more of panic to the soul than that redness which affrights in blood (189-91).

Here is Ishmael evidenced hard at work attempting to explain away his experience of whiteness in typical fashion by researching the typical conveyances of the color. He has “gone through the long Vaticans and street-stalls of the earth” to gather as much information as he can find on the topic of whiteness (ix). Yet, he is unable to produce much in the way of documentation for the color’s sinister chill which “affrights in blood” much more than even redness (191). As a narrator, Ishmael often goes to great lengths to offer the historical lineage of something he is discussing, to align himself with scholars on the topic and to present himself as veritable to the reader. Perhaps hyperbolic, Ishmael’s catalogue is charged with emotionality that is replete with spiritual themes, such as the “divine spotlessness and power” of whiteness and the holiest “white forked flame” upon the altar (189). His language is able to impart his sense of urgency to convey the sublime and uncanny nature of the color white and how it is able to unnerve him in spite of the color’s long history of being celebrated for virtue. Yet his emotions impart

the contrary; white, for Ishmael is intolerable as a spiritual idea for it is irrevocably linked with death and despair. This is telling of Ishmael's emotions taking charge and overriding his intellect. This is the result of his trauma aboard the *Pequod*. White may symbolize many grand things, but the undercurrent of dread that Ishmael feels is undeniable.

The whiteness of the whale symbolizes his "dumb blankness full of meaning", onto which Ahab then projects his own "colorless, all-color of atheism" (198). Notable is the line of reasoning that the white whale becomes a metaphorical *tabula rasa*, onto which the human characters (mainly Captain Ahab) may project their fears and emotions and direct their hatred towards. While at the same time being simply a natural creature alive in the vast oceans, Moby Dick is also a supernatural creature alive at the core of Ahab's heart. In this way, the whale functions in a symbolic role within the story shared by the symbolic territory of the doubloon, as expounded upon in the chapter of the same name. Ahab offers the doubloon up to whoever sights the white whale first. The desires and probations of the crew spill out onto the mysterious glyphs of the coin in the same subjective, "monomaniac way" as they do onto the hieroglyph-marked skin of the whale they seek (440-1, 315).

Kopcewicz also draws a "parallel to Moby Dick's double – the doubloon. As Ahab quasi-scholarly addresses this discourse in Chapter 99 – 'Look, you, Doubloon, your zodiac here is the life of man in one round chapter; and now I'll read it off, straight out of the book'" (38). The point is valid but Kopcewicz misunderstands that, in fact, Ahab is not the speaker of that particular quote; rather, it is Stubb, who tries his "hand at raising a meaning out of these queer curvatures here [on the doubloon] with the Massachusetts calendar" (442-3). Stubb also enlists the help of "Bowditch's navigator"

and even “Daboll’s arithmetic” to glean any meaning from the gold coin, thus, it is Stubb, and not Ahab, who is being “quasi-scholarly” in the quoted passage (Melville 442-3; Kopcewicz 38). The insights Stubb receives are the metaphorical story of the zodiac told through the misadventure of man, as the sun moves along its zenith. The sun’s story of the year becomes an allegory for man’s story told in broad strokes, and with this Stubb has quelled his curiosity concerning the symbolic gold coin. Stubb does not need to read any further into the matter, as to his personality the zodiacal explanations and almanac wisdom is a sufficient stand-in for the real thing.

Conversely, Ahab’s interpretive prowess regarding the mystical doubloon is only to see himself referred to in every relevant marking on the Ecuadorian coin. The doubloon he offers to any crew member that sights Moby Dick first, represents only an image of himself to Ahab, proving his obsessive self-absorption and malignant megalomania:

There’s something ever egotistical in mountain-tops and towers, and all other grand and lofty things; look here, --three peaks as proud as Lucifer. The firm tower, that is Ahab; the volcano, that is Ahab; the courageous, the undaunted, and victorious fowl, that, too, is Ahab; all are Ahab; and this round gold is but the image of the rounder globe, which, like a magician’s glass, to each and every man in turn but mirrors back his own mysterious self. Great pains, small gains for those who ask the world to solve them; it cannot solve itself. (441-2)

Ahab describes himself “proud as Lucifer” and likens himself to a volcano, a tower, mountain and bird of prey but all the while he is well aware that the doubloon is only reflecting him back to himself, like a “magician’s glass” (442). He interprets the images as “egotistical”, which he surely is himself (441). Ahab then proceeds to make a prediction for his future with grave seriousness and accepts firmly what he divines:



Methinks now this coined sun wears a ruddy face; but see! aye, he enters the sign of the storms, the equinox! and but six months before he wheeled out of a former equinox at Aries! From storm to storm! So be it, then. Born in throes, 'tis fit that man should live in pains and die in pangs! So be it, then! Here's stout stuff for woe to work on. So be it, then. (442)

This is one of many instances in the book where the tragic outcome of the plot is clearly foretold. When Ahab accepts his divined fate—“[s]o be it, then!”, he becomes complicit in the suicide mission of his crew (442). Of course, because the doubloon is a symbolic mirror, “the mystic-marked whale remains undecipherable”, and each crew member sees only that which is reflective of their own heart (315); the exception clearly being Ahab, who seems well aware that his suicidal journey of revenge will end in self-destruction and accepts his fate, notwithstanding. So, the doubloon becomes the proxy of Moby Dick: “For it was set apart and sanctified to one awe-striking end; and however wanton in their sailor ways, one and all, the mariners revered it as the white whale’s talisman” (441), the symbolic currency, which is the *Pequod*’s navel, and another example of a light-infused metaphor used to illustrate dark subtext.

Light is used in this novel to represent Captain Ahab’s evil will, the “colorless, all-color of atheism” of Ahab’s *modus operandi* (Melville, 198). The color white is a blank screen for Ahab to project, with his evil light of agency, onto the whale all his ire. The whale is not evil; it is a natural, blank screen, or *tabula rasa* construct, onto which mad Ahab can focus his obsession. So much scholarly effort has been put forth examining the whiteness of the whale that the whiteness of Ahab is often ignored. “Old Thunder”, too, is imbued with supernatural whiteness and is in possession of the many sublime and haunted qualities typically ascribed to Moby Dick (96).

Ahab is a ghost of a man, obsessed with the white whale. This obsession is the

only thing keeping the mad captain alive: “That before living agent, now became the living instrument” of his hate (187). Ahab’s leg is made of whale ivory, as is the stool he is often seen sitting upon. He has a long, “lividly whitish” scar, symbolic of his broken and fragmented self as well as his spiritual yearning towards the whale (126). When Ahab is quoted thinking to himself, he understands himself to be a “madness maddened!” (172), an unswerveable iron will. But this peculiar will Ahab understands as being not as fire red or hot but a ghostly chilling white: “I leave a white and turbid wake; pale waters, paler cheeks, where’er I sail” (171).

Next, much like Hawthorne’s character Arthur Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter*, Captain Ahab sees the sunlight as passing judgment on him. Ahab thinks: “This lovely light, it lights not me; all loveliness is anguish to me, since I can ne’er enjoy. Gifted with the high perception, I lack the low, enjoying power; damned, most subtly and most malignantly! damned in the midst of Paradise!” (171). It is telling that Ahab conceives of the capacity to enjoy sunlight as a “low, enjoying power” and his hatred and monomaniacal suicidal and homicidal mission as a “high perception” and a gift (171). This section offers another important link as to why Melville may have imbued his whale with such otherworldly attributes of coloring, as Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* was published just one year prior to *Moby-Dick* and there is no doubt of Melville having been familiar with the material. Since Hawthorne wove light so complexly in his novel as force of moral agency, Melville may have been moved to do similar himself. Whiteness and light are clearly charged symbols whether viewed through Melville’s metaphysical lens or Ishmael’s scholarly and obsessed one.

The scientific and technical thrust of Ishmael’s careful scholarship *is* the means

by which he will master his fear and transmute hate of the whale after his deep trauma with Moby Dick. In Chapter 86 *The Tail*, Ishmael proclaims, “I celebrate a tail”, and so he does (384): “in the tail the confluent measureless force of the whole whale seems concentrated to a point. Could annihilation occur to matter, this were the thing to do it” (385). Yet, rather than being afraid of this power, Ishmael is astounded by its “appalling beauty”, he explains that “[r]eal strength never impairs beauty or harmony, but it often bestows it; and in everything imposingly beautiful, strength has much to do with the magic” (385). It is clear from the language he uses that he does truly love the whale and finds it beautiful and extraordinary.

By the end of his telling of his story, Ishmael has succeeded in elevating Ahab’s legacy of hate into a genuine love for the whale. Ishmael again and again illustrates this and communicates this idea to the reader by plunging the reader into the inner-workings of the physiognomy of whales, their histories and the periphery of the whaling trade. Ishmael’s own preoccupation and celebration of the whale in form and function becomes emblematic of his mastery of the subject, which allows him to transmute Ahab’s hate into love. The critic Samuel Otter has written: “[t]he deeper we penetrate into the mysteries of the whale’s body, the more we learn about the obsessions of the observer” (134). Melville’s coded metaphysical movement from hate to love via the artifact of the book emerges through Ishmael’s narration of it, but Ishmael’s obsessions are understood as the character’s own.

### Chapter III

#### *Gravity's Rainbow*

*Moby-Dick* is the model for Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. The two giants of the American literary canon have so many images, themes and nuances in common that the latter truly mirrors the former. Pynchon establishes the German V2 rocket as a direct symbolic analogue of Melville's whale. He reprises *Moby-Dick* by using whiteness and light imagery to represent profound dark themes and characterization; and he echoes *Moby-Dick* by using technical and scientific jargon to express metaphysical insights. Along with these three primary points of reflection, Pynchon also imbues his text with many metaphors that harken back directly to Melville. The traumatized protagonist, the evil antagonist, the blank slate of the central image symbol, the focus on scientific allusion, the similarities of encyclopedic style and idiosyncratic form and the characterization of light as malign force also help establish these novels as twins.

Pynchon is reimagining *Moby-Dick* but is able to modernize it by updating its themes. He captures the zeitgeist of the post World War II cultural tapestry by mechanizing the central concept of the white whale with his characterization of the German V2 rocket, while maintaining the function of the central image as readers experienced it through Melville. In *Moby-Dick*, light and whiteness were established as forces of malignancy; this curious concept is at work in *Gravity's Rainbow* as well.

Mutual inspiration is linked to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Pynchon achieves this mainly through the characterization of Captain Weissmann and the reprisal of the novel in miniature through the “Story of Byron the Bulb” (647). Pynchon also uses technical language to express coded spiritual beliefs, although the outcome of the metaphysical ideas turns darker in Pynchon than they were in Melville, as it turns away from nature and love and faces a future fraught with artificially derived, purposeful malice. While nature triumphs and the concept of love reigns in *Moby-Dick*, in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Pynchon extends Melville’s central metaphors but supersedes and undermines the concept of nature beneath a corrupted human will for dominance which updates the metaphysical underpinning to reflect the technology-crazed contemporary human state.

Echoes to *Moby-Dick* are everywhere in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. This thesis approaches this critical inquiry through three lenses of focus: the literary style similarities, the technical ephemera being code for metaphysical beliefs of the authors, and the use of light and whiteness as malign force. The similarities in character development, image doubles, incidental thematic ties and other points of intersection will be woven in with their most pertinent discussions. The 00000 Schwarzgerät rocket is a central symbol, much like the great whale. The rocket looks geometrically similar and shares the same elevated, supernatural status in the story.

The previous chapter established how Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, the artifact of the book itself, was a symbolic metaphor for the hieroglyph-marked skin of the whale. Now another layer is added to the symbolic equation. Andrzej Kopcewicz points out that “the Rocket is a text like Moby Dick, the oblong body with its mysterious signs, scars and hieroglyphs” (38), and this is true, both the rocket and the great whale have enough

gravitas about them to reign as *bona fide* deities in the universe of the novel, with all the depths that a sublime image typically contains in literature. To this end, Kopcewicz writes:

If, as is often maintained, it is Moby Dick (rather than either Ahab or Ishmael) that is the real protagonist of Melville's novel, then the same can be said of the Rocket in *Gravity's rainbow*. Both Moby Dick and the Rocket are from the very beginning referred to and approached with veneration and fear, with love and dread. Both prove agents/agencies of destruction and a means of transcending man's physical limitations. To transcribe Ishmael's "Yes, the world's a ship on its passage out..." [...] into 'the world is a rocket on its passage out' is to quite literally pronounce the world's condition as we have known it for quite some time now. In the duality of its usage and meaning there is both a premonition of death and a hope for the restoration of order (38).

Kopcewicz is pointing out that, indeed, the metaphors are clearly operating in a similar manner in the texts. Both central images are charged with uncanny power and "approached with veneration and fear, with love and dread" (38), as Kopcewicz describes, to the point that critics have argued that the whale is a main character of the novel. These sublime whale and rocket-shaped symbols provide a creation and destruction that the human characters aptly feel throughout the narration. They are clearly the hunters, but various characters in the books are also hunting *them*. While it is useful to analyze both central images as being more than an animal and a weapon, I disagree with Kopcewicz's first assumption: rocket and whale are not protagonists, they are potent symbols. What is true, though, is that both rocket and whale are so nuanced and multi-faceted that they may as well be characters, for all the craft the authors applied to their creation. It remains evident that both whale and rocket are more than mere protagonists of the story, even if, in the end, they live on and continue their supernatural influence elsewhere on the high seas or in the vast Southwestern desert landscapes<sup>22</sup>. Kopcewicz's

second point is well put, however. To apply identical language from Ishmael's narration and apply it direct to the rocket is to reveal another layer of meaning exposing how the destiny of the sublime symbols is very similar in both books. To follow Kopcewicz's example, Ishmael's assertion: "Could annihilation occur to matter, this were the thing to do it" rings as true for the V2 rocket as it does for the whale (385).

### Reprisals of Literary Style

Nathaniel Philbrick described the literary style of *Moby-Dick* as a "willful refusal to follow the usual conventions of 19<sup>th</sup> century fiction"<sup>23</sup> (7). The very same is true for *Gravity's Rainbow* in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It remains one of the most stylistically opaque postmodern novels. It is the similarity in the unconventional, encyclopedic literary style of *Moby-Dick* and *Gravity's Rainbow* that offers one of the strongest arguments for their kinship. Kopcewicz's article, 'The Whale and the rocket: Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's rainbow*', uses Edward Mendelson's ideas to buffer his arguments, using the "Encyclopedic Narrative" idea to conclude that,

The form [in both novels] is syncretic and spacious enough to incorporate such [literary] conventions as the heroic epic, quest romance, symbolist poem, *Bildungsroman*, psychomachia, bourgeois novel, lyric interlude, drama, ecologue, and catalogue [... An encyclopedic narrative] uses a variety of literary styles and is recognized not by a single major trope or convention, but by embracing and entertaining a whole range of discourses, including those of science and technology. (36)

The many examples of literary conventions Kopcewicz lists are indeed at play in both novels. The fact that Melville and Pynchon borrow freely from whatever style serves their point best and then switch over to a different mode is one of the arguments for their stylistic similarity. The fact that both authors use accurate accounts of technology and

sciences is another major point of intersection. To Kopcewicz's list I would add that of Biblical or religious scripture as well as philosophic treatise, as these feature constantly in both *Moby-Dick* and *Gravity's Rainbow*.

Edward Mendelson explains how science and technical minutiae figure into the encyclopedic form in his essay titled, "Encyclopedic Narrative: From Dante to Pynchon". This genre fulfills both the formal and cultural conditions that typically preclude thematic organization by critics and scholars of literature. In this thesis, it serves to illustrate just how the scientific details operate in the life of these novels. Mendelson asserts:

Before exploring the critical implications of encyclopedic narrative, it will be useful to have a sketch of a general theory of the genre and the outlines of a preliminary formal model. Encyclopedic narratives all attempt to render the full range of knowledge and beliefs of a national culture, while identifying the ideological perspectives from which that culture shapes and interprets its knowledge. Because they are products of an era in which the world's knowledge is vastly greater than any one person can encompass, they necessarily make extensive use of the synecdoche. No encyclopedic narrative can describe the whole range of physical science, so examples from one or two sciences serve to represent the whole scientific sector of human knowledge [...] Encyclopedic narrative evolves out of epic and often uses epic structure as its organizing skeleton, but the subjects of epic have become increasingly vestigial to the encyclopedic form. (1269)

The formal model Mendelson describes grows out of the epic form but diverges on vast tangents into various sciences, technical descriptions, and uber-human scope. The ambitious nature of such an undertaking defines itself, for Mendelson, by attempting to explain the complexity of modern issues by using technical constructs. When the two novels considered, *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Moby-Dick*, are deconstructed within the framework of Mendelson's "Encyclopedic Narrative," it becomes difficult to deny a stylistic kinship at least, if not a relationship of deep resonance. Many examples are offered throughout this thesis, one such similarity is the profuse use of false excerpts



from sources that do not exist outside the fictionalized bubble of the novel; the sources cited by the author are often ironic or satiric in nature, presenting a subtle joke or meta-reference thus inverting the purpose of a familiar stylistic form. Another such example is Pynchon's extensive tangents into ballistics and quantum mechanics. Similarly, in Melville's work, entire chapters devoted to pontificating upon the various tools and mechanisms of the whaling trade, as well as the notorious cetological chapters<sup>24</sup>. These serve as the "synecdoche" Mendelson mentions (1269). But the first style resonance is featured before the reader even cracks the binding, in the titles of the books.

The first stylistic example of Pynchon's mirroring of *Moby-Dick* can be evidenced in the novels' titles. The titles of both novels speak directly to the scientific or scholarly technical dimensions. In *Moby-Dick: Or, The Whale* the allusion to scholarship is that of Ishmael's role as schoolmaster, ruler of the intellectual capacity and lover of categories. Since Ishmael's retelling of his traumatic journey aboard the *Pequod* becomes the book, the reader can clearly discern Ishmael's special hand at play in naming his creation, as Ishmael gives the reader a choice of how we would like to view the white whale: as the supernatural named terror or as simply a whale. Naming has a long biblical history, and so, when a whale receives a name, he rises in rank. If we simply view him as a fish, a natural creature, he remains neutral, without the possibility of vengeful agency. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, the title suggests one force of nature acting on all of life's phenomena. The force of gravity pulls the visible light (via the rainbow) down, as it pulls everything down, including the rocket. Impact with the earth is imminent, and that is the central visual image conjured by the title, which then is reinforced with numerous instances of similar and identical reasoning throughout the novel. But here, like Ishmael,

Pynchon too gives the reader a choice: do we view the title as a simple parabolic metaphor from science? Or do we see the deeper implication of the novel, that there is impact immanent? This thesis argues that the implied impact is enacted at the very end of the novel in the reader's own present by Pynchon's clever use of circular narrative structure (true for *Moby-Dick* as well) and second person directives.

Pynchon's title serves as a hint to the reader's present tense, all he will use the concept to end the book. Pynchon describes a "mania for name-giving, dividing the Creation finer and finer, analyzing, setting namer more hopelessly apart from named, even to bringing in the mathematics of combination, tacking together established nouns to get new ones, the insanely, endlessly diddling play of a chemist whose molecules are words... (391). This is a perfect example of self-reflective analysis, Pynchon is doing this very type of writing, "endlessly diddling", but it may as well be describing *Moby-Dick* too, with how much resonance is shared between the two titles (391). "Names by themselves may be empty, but the *act of naming*..." is wrought with meaning (366).

After the titles, the next such mirror is evidenced in both novels' dedications to fellow authors. Henry Melville's *Moby-Dick* is dedicated to Nathaniel Hawthorne. The dedication reads, "In token of my admiration for his genius, this book is inscribed to Nathaniel Hawthorne" (preface). Melville's clear regard for his contemporary, as well as their ample correspondence, adds a voluminous subtext to the novel. The same is true for Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, which is dedicated to fellow writer and contemporary, Richard Farina, who was active from the mid-1950s until his death in 1966. Pynchon's dedication reads simply, "For Richard Farina" (preface). This link creates a thematic overlap that has gone largely unnoticed by critics.

Pynchon and Farina were classmates at Cornell University and were close enough in their youth for Pynchon to have been the Best Man at Farina's wedding to Mimi Baez and also one of his pallbearers at the funeral service in 1966, when Farina tragically died in a motorcycle accident on his wife's 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, and, coincidentally, the morning of his first published novel's<sup>25</sup> launch day.<sup>26</sup> The fact that Pynchon dedicated his next published work to Farina means a great deal, since *The Crying of Lot 49* was published before Farina's death in 1966. It is clear that Pynchon felt similarly towards Farina one hundred years later as Melville did towards Hawthorne, from his warm essay on the subject, which serves as an Introduction to newer editions of *Been Down So Long it Looks Like Up to Me*.<sup>27</sup> Since the larger, intentional dialectic is set up within the same framework, it is easy to see an over-arching stylistic similarity in the form of both books.

Critic Stephen C. Weisenburger points out that the action of *Gravity's Rainbow* plays out over nine months, with the climax of the book taking place on Easter and April Fool's Day, when the Rocket 00000 is fired at the end of the novel (11). The significance of this fact cannot be ignored, as it closely correlates to the real-life death date of Richard Farina in Carmel, California, to whom the book is dedicated. Nine months is also the gestational period for a human in utero. Pynchon is clearly commemorating his friend's death through the end action of his novel, switching into unusual second-person narration, as the plot jumps to 1970s Los Angeles. Many lines jump out as significant, "The Santa Monica Freeway is traditionally the scene of every form of automotive folly known to man [...] Stuck on each windshield and rear window is a fluorescent orange strip that reads FUNERAL"(755-756), and later even mentions his friend by name, "Dick, you character!" (756). When they encounter "a veritable caravan of harmonica

players” on the Hollywood Freeway, the character named Richard M. Zhlubb even comments, “[t]here aren’t as many tambourines as last year”, all can be interpreted as references to Farina’s well-known stature as folk musician (756-7). The harmonica acts as a powerful secondary symbol for Slothrop’s story, appearing and reappearing several times in the novel, including the sodium amytal incident where he drops the harmonica accidentally down the toilet and goes after it in a hallucinatory episode of remembrance of his youth (71).

Much like the famed correspondence between Melville and Hawthorne, Pynchon and Farina have a history of communicating through their art with references to one another. Farina composed an instrumental song titled *V.*, named after Pynchon’s first novel. Even the song that closes *Gravity’s Rainbow* may be a direct citation to Farina’s work. So, before the discussion has even moved onto the title pages, the two books are clearly operating in a similar fashion in their literary context, setting up an insider conversation, artist to artist, and between author and reader. The literary style of *Gravity’s Rainbow* presents the idea of the book itself as a parabola shape, wherein the end results of the plot action of the novel lead to the beginning once more, which is Pynchon reprising Melville’s stylistic structure of the novel. *Gravity’s Rainbow* ends with a love song to a rocket.

Thomas Pynchon’s stylistic structure often utilizes mockery and satire, as well as innuendo and pun to great effect, mirroring *Moby-Dick*. Parodies of Holy Scripture, lascivious songs, real, falsified or fragmented quotations and a long list of related ephemera are as much a significant aspect of *Gravity’s Rainbow* as are paranoia and the looming mood of war. These quirks are actually a baseline in both books; it is a norm that

the reader acclimates to throughout the experience of reading the book. As Ishamel himself phrases it, “[w]e expand to its bulk” (466). Akin to Shakespeare’s use of the character of the Fool to present the play’s moral heart, the brittle moral principle is to be found in fractured form, amidst these marginal, often overlooked passages. From Pynchon, one example being the very first epigraph in the novel, attributed to Wernher Von Braun, Captain Weissmann’s real-life counterpart, which reads, “Nature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation. Everything science has taught me, and continues to teach me, strengthens my belief in the continuity of our spiritual existence after death” (1). This quote is used to introduce the concept of energy transformation as a continual theme. Von Braun’s words also foretell the natural fate of the protagonist, Tyrone Slothrop, in terms of his eventual absorption into the novel/transformation, as well as the fate of Weissmann, who is destined to enjoy plenty more power and fame in his future endeavors, in spite of, or even on account of, his evil deeds. While Weissmann is clearly the mirror of Ahab, Slothrop is a darkly obscured version of Ishmael. Tyrone Slothrop is an anagram for “sloth or entropy,” entropy being the Absolute Zero point towards which nature is tending; this concept reveals Pynchon’s metaphysical dread. Von Braun’s passage is also hinting at the transformation of the old, natural god-type for the new rocket-age one, foretelling the propagation and influence of corrupted human willpower which is shown to triumph in the novel.

The hard science, various narrative ploys, stylistic improvisations, imagistic tangents, and many other literary devices are integral to both authors for specific and similar effects. Pynchon, like Melville, makes profuse use of epigraphs. The use of false excerpts from sources that do not exist outside the fictionalized bubble of the novel

creates a layer of intricate world-making that makes the novel come to life in more profound ways, as per the tenets of Mendelson's and Kopcewicz's "Encyclopedic Narrative" hypothesis<sup>28</sup>. The sources cited by the authors are often ironic or satiric in nature, presenting a subtle joke or meta-reference thus inverting the purpose of a familiar stylistic form, while at the same time, hinting at a deeper seed of metaphysical conviction. A potent example of spiritual information conveyed by marginal means is found by analyzing Pynchon's epigraph conjuring allusions to the *Gospel of Thomas* which reads: "Dear Mom, I put a couple of people in Hell today. . . . —Fragment, thought to be from the *Gospel of Thomas* (Oxyrhynchus papyrus number classified)" (537). The fact that the papyrus number is classified alludes to censorship and limiting information by the military, national powers or religious institutions, all of which serving as the ominous "They" in Pynchon's book.

In his article, "The Gospel of Thomas (Pynchon): Abandoning Eschatology in Gravity's Rainbow," Joshua Pederson argues that Pynchon's use of the chapter epigraph actually provides insight into his intentions regarding how *Gravity's Rainbow* should be approached. Pederson writes, "in one of the book's chapter epigraphs [...] Pynchon makes a fleeting allusion to the *Gospel of Thomas* and simultaneously creates a modern piece of pseudepigrapha, fabricating a false new piece of the sayings gospel" (140). His allusion is to the apocryphal gospel of Thomas, popularly known to most as "doubting Thomas". Pederson writes:

The book's opening passage describes a war-time evacuation in entropic terms; refugees forced from their homes by a bombing threat stream out of the city into the harsh countryside, and their movement represents an effort by the system to "try to bring events to Absolute Zero," the ultimate low-energy state. But if in physical systems, the return

to Absolute Zero is undesirable, in social terms, it is tantamount to salvation [...] Pynchon suggests that preterition can be a precious blessing. For while being “passed over” in God’s divine plan for the world is a bane, being “passed over” by the rockets that define the parabolas of gravity’s rainbows is to be, very literally, be both preterite *and* holy (148-149, 157)

The bombs are trying to bring events to “Absolute Zero”, which is destruction (3). Being “passed over” by rockets implies survival in a world where destruction is immanent; the way it often is inside of a war zone. Since being passed over by a rocket would be a sort of blessing, Pederson’s ideas hold something of value to them but they are impotent for decoding the upshot of Pynchon’s spiritual message. Instead, it is evident that with this example of pseudepigrapha Pynchon plays with the notions of elect vs. preterite, setting apart the “us” from the “them”, only to establish a new rocket god construct who is “eminently fair [...] Everyone’s equal. Same chances of getting hit. Equal in the eyes of the rocket” (Pynchon 57). Of course, it would be nice if Pederson were right and the reader could hope to be passed over by the rocket and survive, becoming another Ishmael who could grow to love the rocket. Except this is not the end that Pynchon imagines. At the very end of the novel, a personal, “Perfect Rocket” will “Find the last poor Pret’rite one...” (426, 760).

In fact, Pynchon’s “Perfect Rocket” god prophecy for the reader is hovering just overhead; it is “still up there, still descending [...] and with it an explosion that will take him by surprise” (426). This is exactly the action taking place at the end of the novel. The implication is that the reader will not be blessed with preterition. The rocket will find him. In Melville, the character of Ishmael, too, is operating on the theme of preterition, as he remains the lone survivor of his ill-fated adventure at sea, having been passed over by the whale. Captain Ahab illustrates how to be *chosen* by the elect forces within the

context of the novel is the same as being devoured by the whale. The song that closes *Gravity's Rainbow* is the end result of Pynchon's prophesizing. When the song is sung, he invites everyone to join in the singing of it, an invitation into his outlook on the sacred concept of the present moment, "Now everybody—," but the concept of preterition is unavailable by the end of the novel, as will be analyzed in the following sections (760). These ideas frame and illustrate how scientific detail exposes Pynchon's complex metaphysical views throughout his book.

Since *Moby-Dick's* and *Gravity's Rainbow's* formal structures are similar, some critics have argued that they require their own genre.<sup>29</sup> Their shared structure is non-linear, contains many narrative threads and is full of devices meant to distract the reader from the conventional flow of the plot. The plot action orbits around the central images, held in symbolic gravity by their power of symbolic meaning. Once the symbols have been decoded, their implications justify their placement in the novels, peppering the plot. These insights are revealed slowly throughout the stylized layers of the text.

Certain details of Mendelson's theory, however, need to be tested further. Mendelson argues that "each encyclopedic narrative is an encyclopedia of literary styles, ranging from the most primitive and anonymous levels of proverb-lore to the most esoteric heights of euphemism" (1271). Testing this claim, what comes to mind immediately is Pynchon's 'Proverbs for Paranoids'<sup>30</sup> to lay out the formula for the way in which Pynchon's nearly-sacred, sublime central metaphor becomes a tangible object, able to be reached and dissected. Pynchon's first Proverb reads, "You may never get to touch the Master, but you can tickle his creatures", this framing is helpful for laying out the relationship of the hunter/hunted dialectic at play (237). The creatures one can tickle may



be read as natural creatures, such as whales or people; the implication being that one cannot interact with god directly, but can certainly get to know him through his creations. Historically, this sentiment is usually seen through a soft lens where one is awestruck at the wonderful varieties of the beautiful fauna and their many types and colors and the human would be moved to deep reverence for god (here the implied “master”) and inspired, then, to worship him. This applies through the wonder of endless varieties of whales and their unique nuances as catalogues offered by Ishmael and also through the darker hunter aspect of the human animal, whose mastery of the natural elements has reached the point in creation where humans are obsessed with the commodification of goods for profit. This idea gets even darker in Pynchon, for, by this time in history, humans are obsessed with taming not only the natural elements, but also to leave god’s creation (Earth) altogether via rocket through space exploration endeavors, becoming ostensible new gods themselves. These human urges address the interplay of ideas between the human usurpation of power via scientific prowess and metaphysical manipulation. Here, Pynchon’s second Proverb becomes meaningful: “The innocence of the creatures is in inverse proportion to the immortality of the Master” (241). If god’s creatures are so very innocent, then god is immortal, indeed. But, as we can plainly see that humankind is riddled with vice, corruption and all manner of evil, especially through the lens of Pynchon’s novel, we can finish Pynchon’s thought by concluding that god is not all that immortal after all and humans overtake god’s will by the proliferation of evil.

Thomas Pynchon is mirroring the previously discussed concepts in *Moby-Dick* of Captain Ahab being imbued with qualities of whiteness present in his scar and ivory false limb, this becomes a strong metaphor for mankind’s dilution into a new, no longer natural

species; perhaps post-natural. Tyrone Slothrop may not be able to undo a lifetime's worth of Pavlovian conditioning enacted upon him by getting his hands on the mysterious Schwarzgerät, although he certainly comes physically close to the horror of it aboard the ship *Anubis*. Pynchon's third insight from his Proverbs for Paranoids seems to be specially assigned to Slothrop or anyone sharing in his condition: "If they can get you asking the wrong questions, they don't have to worry about the answers" (251). "They" are, of course, the sinister powers that be, often referred to as just 'they' and 'them', who are in various states of being informed as well as various stations of power whom the paranoid personality (here, Slothrop), perceives as a threat. This transitions very well into the fourth proverb, "You hide, they seek", as it is never the other way around (262). Similarly, the crew of the *Pequod* throughout *Moby-Dick* are not be able to either mutiny or kill the white whale and undo their fate, but what is actually at stake is a philosophical mediation between the sacred and the profane (or simply natural, if the formula is extended to the animal that is Moby Dick). Both Moby Dick, the whale itself, and the Schwarzgerät or 00000 rocket are symbolic objects, sought after to avenge a conceptualization of the truth; and while truth is sublime, objects are tangible. Pynchon's fifth and final insight from Proverbs for Paranoids reads, "Paranoids are not paranoids because they're paranoid, but because they keep putting themselves, fucking idiots, deliberately into paranoid situations" (292). The latter proverb is Tyrone Slothrop's *modus operandi* throughout the novel, as he is in the role of the seeker on a quest for rocket information to unlock his past. These profane proverbs are keys to decoding Pynchon's complicated spiritual and metaphysical stance, but he presents them only in the form of symbols and allusions.

Symbolistic allusions are constantly interrupting plot action by interjecting technical or philosophical content<sup>31</sup>, and the reader gets closer to understanding how the primary symbols are operating in the symbolic material. By the end of the novels, it is evident that the deep understanding of the whale and rocket prepares the reader to either love the whale, as Ishmael has come to love him, or, in Pynchon, the reader is prepared for the personal rocket to find them in *their* real (vs. narrative) present, as the narrator of *Gravity's Rainbow* has prepared them for the immanent impact. This paranoia is understood by Pynchon as superlative to its alternative: "If there is something comforting—religious, if you want—about paranoia, there is still also anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long" (434). The meaning is that anti-paranoia is intolerable to humans and a healthy dose of paranoia is necessary as the powers that be are using the concept of Entropy Management for their own dark ends. This dictates one of the main branches of plot and propels the narrative forward.

The final way that *Gravity's Rainbow* mirrors *Moby-Dick* is that the very artifact of Pynchon's book, like the artifact of Melville's, is giant, just as the whale and rocket are giant. Both novels loom large not only in their ideas and breadth but also in page count, with Melville's coming in at 577 pages and Pynchon's at 760<sup>32</sup>. The complexities at work are numerous. Mendelson sums up the point by writing, "No one could suppose that any encyclopedic narrative is an attractive or comfortable work. Like the giants whose histories they include, all encyclopedias are monstrous. (They are *monstra* in the oldest Latin sense as well: omens of dire change)" (1272). By approaching the texts as sprawling, encyclopedic giants it becomes possible to unlock the similarities of the

novels and to illustrate the kinships in plot, theme, characterization and many other traditional literary methodologies of inquiry. In short, Melville and Pynchon both use their fragmentary literary styles to reveal their stories' philosophic material. Next, I will turn to the novels' technical details and codes.

### The Devil in the Technical Details

Melville and Pynchon embed their spiritual content and character insights in the minutiae of technical details connected with the central metaphors. Melville conveys Ishmael's love for whales in the mass of technical information gathered about them. He also codes spiritual insights into the characters' interpretations of the etchings found on the face of the doubloon. Pynchon codes metaphysical subtext into the names and scientific principles governing his fictional creations. Pynchon also uses scientific specialisms to characterize his antagonists; both of which become a reprisal of Melville's methods.

The rocket, like Melville's whale, is the primary focus of technical attention. Edward Mendelson points out that "[t]he Rocket's whiteness is reflected in the whiteness of its builder. This is the whiteness that spells destruction or death" (39). Pynchon is conjuring a visage of the white whale's ominous and symbolic weight and characterizing his villain's obsessions with the rocket to remind the reader of Ahab's obsession with Moby Dick. Utilizing the rockets containing Imipolex G to his own autocratic and fetishistic ends, the character of Captain Dominus "Blicero" Weissmann becomes the worst of evil turned inwardly egomaniacal. Between the two Captains, Captain Ahab would appear as a comforting, wise and sensitive man when compared with Captain Weissmann. "He's the example par excellence of people metamorphosing into monsters

by indulging will to power, or subjection, to the uttermost. [It is] Captain Ahab hardening himself into the image of the thing he hates, hyperintensified by modern technopower, which enables for greater excesses than Melville ever dreamed of”, adds Buell (440).

Weissmann’s obsession and sexualizing of the 00000 rocket is the dark mirroring of Captain Ahab’s diabolical obsession with Moby Dick. Both *white* captains are presented to the reader as single-mindedly lusting after the sublimity of the object of their ire and fetishizing. The attraction of the giant central image of rocket and whale is full of metaphysical coding. Pynchon is, like Melville, playing on the familiar theme of deciphering the meaning of the symbols prevalent in designing rockets and the metaphysical connotations of rocketry. The German phallo-centric obsession with rocketry is woven deep into the heart of this story. For every character in the book, the rocket means *something*; all orbit under its great gravitational command, to greater or lesser degrees. Pynchon writes:

But the Rocket has to be many things, it must answer to a number of different shapes in the dreams of those who touch it—in combat, in tunnel, on paper—it must survive heresies shining, unconfoundable ... and heretics there will be: Gnostics who have been taken in a rush of wind and fire to chambers of the Rocket-throne... Kabbalists who study the Rocket as Torah, letter by letter—rivets, burner cup and brass rose, its text is theirs to permute and combine into new revelations, always unfolding... Manichaeans who see two Rockets, good and evil, who speak together in the sacred idiolalia of the Primal Twins (some say their names are Enzian and Blicero) of a good Rocket to take us to the stars, an evil Rocket for the World’s suicide, the two perpetually in struggle. (727)

The idea of the rocket taking on many shapes to conform to ideas about it, even “on paper”, is Pynchon’s comment on the “new revelations” of the rocket god (727). The language he uses fuses classical religious language with rocketry. The rocket is likened to the Kabbalah, alchemy (“burner cup and brass rose” are alchemical tools), the Torah, and

good and evil (727). The idea of the primal twins, one black and one white, is telling of the many dualistic impulses the reader is faced with when reading *Gravity's Rainbow*. Ironically, and perfectly situated in this thesis' conjecture that whiteness represents evil, the good twin would be black (Enzian) and the evil twin would be white (Weissmann). Closer to Pynchon's truth is what comes just after on the same page, a modern solipsistic take on spirituality, holiness and their repercussions. It is not Pynchon's solipsism; it's the worldview that he fears:

[T]hey will *all* be sought out. Each will have his personal Rocket. Stored in its target-seeker will be the heretic's EEG, the spikes and susurrations of heartbeat, the ghost-blossomings of personal infrared, each Rocket will know its intended and hunt him, ride him a green-doped and silent hound, through our World, shining and pointed in the sky at his back, his guardian executioner rushing in, *rushing closer...* (727).

All resistance will be "sought out" by a potent and "personal Rocket" (727). Each target's heartbeat will be programmed into the seeking mechanism. The Rocket will also make use "of personal infrared" and hunt its target relentlessly; each person is in this way guaranteed his personal annihilation (727). It is my contention that the preceding quote holds Pynchon's deepest emotional fears and paranoias which can be succinctly stated in this way: The aforementioned heretics are the ones who still cling to the natural laws of life or the sky-god construction of ancient times; they are the people who "will all be sought out" and annihilated by the prophesized rocket (727). The reader is grouped into this category as well. These heretical non-believers are rejecting the technological system of the new god-head mechanical creation, a rocket god for the rocket future. The System is a conglomerate of insidious power of "Them" housed in corporations and self-interested political, national and commercial entities which control technology and also control the populous. Technology is power. The heretics are not simply people with

divergent interpretations of what the rocket future and the power struggles associated with it may mean. Since the godhead rocket is as evil as its creators, human destruction is guaranteed. The monster rocket has, metaphorically, been fed the lives of several genocides through the war efforts of Nazi Germany (Jews, Herero), the German populace has been complicit (more or less), joining in the guilt, and the cunningly engineered rocket has now replaced god, symbolically.

In the solipsistic modern world the rocket grows powerful enough to single out every individual and descend, Dorothy's house-style<sup>33</sup>, on that individual at any time, and, further, that all people complicit in this circumstance must therefore share in its reality going into the future (therefore, fate). Pynchon evokes a powerful image of politically interested international technology cartels, and how their product, branding, control and commodification becomes the "business-as-usual" world market structure that has grown only more insidious with each passing year to today. The prime example from *Gravity's Rainbow* is the Phoebus Corporation, which is discussed alongside the forthcoming analysis of "The Story of Byron the Bulb" (647).

This insight follows the scientific certainties that Pynchon wrestles with philosophically throughout the novel. In their joint article, "Science as Metaphor: Thomas Pynchon and 'Gravity's Rainbow'", Friedman and Puetz help to explain the hard science:

Equations of calculus decorate the pages [of *Gravity's Rainbow*], and from the quantum mechanical behavior of elementary particles to the Friedmann geometry of the curved universe, we are teased with facts about chemistry, physics, mathematics, and cosmology [...] The central image from science, which Pynchon develops into a striking parable of all existence, is nothing less than the thermodynamics of life itself. While the general tendency of the physical process is towards increasing disorder, twentieth-century biophysics has realized that life violates this pattern [...]

life continues to go against the general flow [...] (345-6).

It is true that Pynchon makes ample use of mathematics, calculus and various sciences. These specialisms code Pynchon's beliefs and he uses the jargon of science to embed meaningful subtext to his novel. Here Friedman and Puetz quote Pynchon, setting up the life conundrum, as he sees life to be "the conjuror's secret by which—though it is not often Death is told so clearly to fuck off—the living genetic chains prove even labyrinthine enough to preserve some human face down ten or twenty generations" (qtd in Friedman, Puetz 346). So life as we experience it seems to go against the general scientific tendency of nature, which means that in human terms, the experience of living tends to go towards order rather than away from it, which the science dictates is that case. Friedman and Puetz continue to explain both the scientific facts as they are, and Pynchon's powerful use of it:

In the final analysis, life does not really violate the laws of thermodynamics, since any particular system *can* become more ordered and energetic if it does so at the expense of greater disorder and loss of energy in the rest of the universe. Any living system can increase its order and energy by "removing from the rest of the World these vast quantities of energy to keep its own tiny desperate fraction showing a profit." (p. 412) The secret of the life process is the trick Pynchon calls, "Entropy Management" (p.260). Entropy Management means that order can only be produced along with a compensating amount of disorder, the same widespread chaos that always puzzles Pynchon's characters. Death and decay are the disorder that makes possible the endless variety and renewal of life (346).

This is the crux of the formula: "any particular system *can* become more ordered and energetic if it does so at the expense of greater disorder and loss of energy in the rest of the universe" (346). For Pynchon, this means that evil controllers of power syphon order into their own particular system (here, the Nazi party and war machine) away from the aforementioned heretics (Jews and common civilians), and this becomes the "Entropy



Management” trick that technological factions use to secure their own power. Friedman and Puetz recognize the scientific metaphor Pynchon is using but do not seem to glean the actual philosophical implications that Pynchon is divulging to the reader. What Pynchon reveals through these coded specialisms is that war is one majorly effective method that humans know of that manages entropy, i.e. war reenergizes the grid of power so that a few powerful individuals benefit at the expense of many (the way trade, the economy, rocket cartels, pharmaceuticals and many other corrupt and self-interested power conglomerates are singled out, I.G. Farben among them). These self-interested organizations become the system. The madness of war and its endless complexities are a result of calculated decisions by the powers that be, the ones coined “They” throughout the novel. Entropy Management is here employed as black magic. This is the complex metaphysical underpinning of Pynchon’s work and the arena to divulge the topic, as for Melville, is in the technical details.

This same analytical application is useful in finding further links between how both authors code spiritual meaning into other symbols besides the whale and rocket in the text. A small, gold doubloon is able to galvanize the crew of the *Pequod* into Ahab’s service. The symbolic functions of this potent talisman reveal the crew members’ own strengths and failings. Captain Ahab’s insights, as have been discussed previously, reveal a suicidal resolve to his monomaniacal vengeance quest. For Queequeg, it may as well be “an old button off some king’s trowsers” (444-5). Stubb uses almanacs and calendars to make sense of the zodiac signs and interprets the doubloon as a prophecy of whaling timing for their voyage. Flask also sees doom in the pictures, and so forth. It is clear that the coin is a proxy of the white whale and that it is “the ship’s navel, this doubloon here,

and [all the crew members are] all on fire to unscrew it” (445). Their attempts to “unscrew it” are physical, intellectual and philosophical, as well (445). With the same logic at play, Pynchon weaves symbolic insight into tiny details about his fictional polymer, Imipolex G.

The most powerful example, beyond the image of the rocket itself, of a specialist theme being employed by Pynchon to convey philosophical and spiritual information is his specialized polymer substance Imipolex G. This is the “erotic polymer”<sup>34</sup> that the Schwarzgerät contains and a key to the deepest mysteries of hidden meaning in *Gravity’s Rainbow* (250). The chemical manufacturer IG Farben has commissioned the character Laszlo Jamf to create a synthetic polymer in 1939; the result is Imipolex G. Pynchon codes the concept of Entropy Management into this fictional polymer and hides its spiritual significance in the naming of it. The work of Mack Smith presents a theory on the naming of the Imipolex G polymer through his collection of essays titled *Literary Realism and the Ekphrastic Tradition*. Smith offers: “Jamf<sup>35</sup>’s name is a variation of “I am” and Imipolex is a “-palex,” synthetic structure, that signifies “imi-”, or “I’m I,” a play on God’s description of himself in the voice from the burning bush. One could read “Imipolex” as meaning “I am I” through the agency of “palex,” or synthetic form” (212). The coded meaning here is the emergence of a new synthetic god, whose purpose is to usurp the kingdom by overthrowing nature and her laws. Imipolex G is that technological usurpation via plastics engineering and a herald for the technologically obsessed post-war future. The G at the end of Imipolex could stand for gravity, the natural force in Pynchon’s title, but Smith has another theory:

Imipolex G alludes both to the “IG” of IG Farben, the industrial cartel, and to the acronym “IG” formed by conjoining “I” and “God”. The manipulations of molecular structure are the most insidious ways in which humanity, through technology and economic power, has attempted to play God in creating and destroying nature (212).

Smith’s is a good argument with sound logic, however if the meaning of Imipolex G was something akin to “I am the synthetic god usurping gravity,” a nice elegant meaning could be gleaned. The revelatory information that the reader has been waiting for doesn’t actually appear in the plot of the novel, we never do know for certain whether infant Slothrop has been experimented on using Imipolex G, but there is little doubt that he has. A close approximation of some revelation of the mysteries pertaining Imipolex G are finally addressed at the close of the book. Pynchon describes the substance:

Imipolex G is the first plastic that is actually *erectile* [...] (slowly gleaming to the Void. Silver and black. Curvewarped reflections of stars flowing across, down the full length of<sup>36</sup>, round and round in meridians exact as meridians of acupuncture. What are the stars but points in the body of God where we insert the healing needles of our terror and longing? [...]) (699).

The long parenthetical is most telling of the spiritual implications of this substance, not least of which is implied by the visual characteristics of the plastic: So a silvery black image, a mirror, is used to explain the very same effect at the micro level inside the molecules of the intelligent plastic and at the macro level in human relationship to god. The stars shimmering in the countenance of the plastic are operating in the same way as the stars in the heavens, a pin-point into which humans may aim their fears and dreams of salvation through the scientific aspects of space travel and of substance-based behavioral testing on humans.<sup>37</sup> This close, critical reading has shown how Pynchon (much like detail-oriented Ishmael) digs deep into many technical aspects of his creations to show the power inherent within them.

As well as being metaphysically insightful, technical details are also a primary source of character insight in both novels. Just as Melville's Ishmael neatly files types of whales into categories typically representative of types of books, so Pynchon mixes intellectual metaphors to represent his characters' realities. A second prime example is Pynchon's characterization of Laszlo Jamf by way of scientific metaphor, which is of special significance because it tells more about the man through his peculiar scientific bias than we are otherwise offered as readers. Pynchon writes, "In the last third of his life, there came over Laszlo Jamf [...] a hostility, a strangely *personal* hatred, for the covalent bond" (577). Emotional opinions superimposed on top of impartial molecular principles are thus reflective of the mind making these anthropomorphic judgments.

Pynchon goes on:

That something so mutable, so *soft*, as a sharing of electrons by atoms of carbon should lie at the core of life, *his* life, struck Jamf as a cosmic humiliation. *Sharing?* How much stronger, how everlasting was the *ionic* bond—where electrons are not shared, but *captured*. *Seized!* and held! polarized plus and minus, these atoms, no ambiguities... how he came to love that clarity; how stable it was, such mineral stubbornness! (577).

Jamf's "cosmic humiliation" is explained as being caused by common chemical reaction (577). This becomes telling of the character's flaws when a deep analysis is applied as to what these scientific principles represent: The ionic bond is the symbol of the dominant predator, and the covalent bond is that of the submissive victim; the formula for transcendence is ascribed as a scientific will to improve on the systems provided by nature (a real-life Nazi obsession), playing god, as it were. Mack Smith supports this reading of Pynchon by writing:

The manipulations of molecular structure are the most insidious

ways in which humanity, through technology and economic power, has attempted to play God in creating and destroying nature. Imipolex G is one of the two inventions by Jamf that attempt to subject the human “I,” as “God,” upon the molecular universe (212).

Pynchon’s penchant for clever naming is witnessed here in the subtleties of the name he uses for the polymer substance. The very molecules are usurping power from nature and redirecting it towards the shadow desires of the military and technology leaders. The other substance here mentioned is Oneirine theophosphate. These two fictional substances, Imipolex G and Oneirine theophosphate, become evidence of human attempts to overwrite natural laws. This idea fits perfectly with the contentions of this thesis that the most technical details hide the sublime religiosity. The same concept was evidenced in Melville’s *Doublon* Chapter. Pynchon describes an exchange between the Russian characters Vaslav Tchitcherine and Wimp taking place right before the men inject themselves with Jamf’s hallucinatory Oneirine:

A syringe, a number 26 point. Bloods stifling in the brown-wood hotel suite. To chase or worry this argument is to become word-enemies, and neither man really wants to. Oneirine theophosphate is one way around the problem. (Tchitcherine: “You mean *thiophosphate*, don’t you?” Thinks *indicating the presence of sulfur*... Wimpe: “I mean *theophosphate*, Vaslav,” *indicating the presence of God*.) (702).

This passage highlights Pynchon’s obsessive technical details, here the distinctions built into the words of the substances. For the scientific community, the prefix “thio” would indicate that sulfur was present in the mixture, while the prefix “theo” would render the word to pertain to god. This play on words is masking Pynchon’s painstaking details to show that insidious factions have seized technology, and therefore the scientific community. The new synthetic god-construct has been manufactured for various applications by Jamf, on the micro as well as macro level, with a new theology usurping

the original, natural one. This is the very same modality working in the molecular construction of Imipolex G and the implications Pynchon wants to reader to be aware of. The rocket, as metaphor, can thus be read as both the destroyer of man as well as the beacon of hope and potential future means of survival and potential savior of mankind as a means of ultimate escape from the Earth and its laws into the cosmos. Scientifically, the rocket is capable of majestic ascension through the careful manipulation of the elements by mankind, as well as inevitable, terrible impact. Pynchon writes, “This ascent will be betrayed to Gravity”, capitalizing the G as in God (758). He goes on, “But the Rocket engine, the deep cry of combustion that jars the soul, promises escape. The victim, in bondage to falling, rises on a promise, a prophecy, of Escape...” (758). The capitalization is of prime importance in these sentences, Gravity, Rocket and Escape become elevated to biblical concepts; the Rocket, a new, fabricated god-force heralds Escape in a teleological sense from Gravity, a force of the newly-outranked force of Nature.

There is no one simple formula for what these science-laden texts are revealing about the nature of the universe and the role of man. However, the specialisms code a spiritual philosophy, which, in Melville, were shown as being a formula for transforming hate into love by way of scholarly engagement. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, the codes reveal Pynchon's warning to humanity not to let technology factions hold all the world's power. Pynchon's obsession with the names and technical specs of his creations (especially of Imipolex G and the Schwarzgerät) are reminders of Melville's vast attention to detail in *Moby-Dick*.

Evil Light and the White Man

In *Gravity's Rainbow* light and whiteness are hiding a profound symbolic darkness; "God's indifferent sunlight" is presented in Pynchon "in all its bleaching and terror" (364). Perhaps one of the most telling examples of how *dark* whiteness and light actually are in *Gravity's Rainbow* is represented by the supreme evil in the form of antagonist Captain Dominus "Blicero" *Weissmann* ("white man"), who is mirroring Captain Ahab, as both Captains can be seen as linked with the willful agency imbued with evil light. In support of this idea, Lawrence Buell writes, "Dominus Blicero [is] Weissmann's military code name, thus symbolically both lord of death and whiteness incarnate: Ahab and the whale rolled into one as it were" (435). Another central example of symbolic evil and light is found in the thematic overture of the entire novel in the "Story of Byron the Bulb" (647). Byron is the immortal vampire Dracula in the form of a light bulb and is an enemy to the System of Entropy Management because his powers lay off the grid. The electrical grid is Pynchon's allegory for the spiritual grid at the center of his metaphysical map. The fact that the physical embodiment of light is a vampire may seem odd at first glance but, truly, it fits right into a pattern of Pynchon's coded insights.

Byron the Bulb is an immortal light bulb whose conception is linked right away to the immortal nature of Vlad Tepes, the historical Dracula. This fact goes unnoticed by Pynchon's critics but sheds much light on the occult meaning of this micro-story within *Gravity's Rainbow*. The connections are apparent from the beginning of Byron's story. Pynchon writes: "Byron was to've been manufactured by Tungsram in Budapest. He would probably have been grabbed up by the ace salesman Geza Rozsavolgyi's father Sandor, who covered all the Transylvanian territory [...]" (647). Much has been written on the connection between the city of Budapest and Vlad Tepes, and obviously,

Transylvania (modern day Romania) too. The parent electrical company even worries that the salesman will throw “some horrible spell on the whole operation if they didn’t give him what he wanted” (647). There are references to “bad witch-leery auras”, the offered explanation “[the] Trouble with Byron’s he’s an old, old soul, trapped inside the glass prison of a Baby Bulb”, “the Immortals”, specifically capitalized here (647-50). Pynchon’s language is telling of supernatural subtext at work in the literature. There’s even a direct naming of Dracula a few pages later in Byron’s story, thrown in as if incidentally as a film title by Pynchon, as a side-note: “Buddy at the last minute decided to go see *Dracula*. He was better off” is the seemingly unrelated and off-hand clue left by Pynchon (652). Upon being manufactured, Byron’s first instincts are of a violent revolution, of war against existing power structures:

Byron has had a vision against the rafters of his ward, of 20 million Bulbs, all over Europe, at a given synchronizing pulse arranged by one of his many agents in the Grid, all these Bulbs beginning to strobe *together*, humans thrashing around the 20 million rooms like fish on the beaches of Perfect Energy— Attention, humans, this has been a warning to you. Next time, a few of us will *explode*” (648-9).

Here Byron is imagining causing epileptic fits to masses of humans by strobing light at certain intervals. Next time light bulbs could even explode, causing more death. These are all hints at the sinister power light has inherent. Byron is bloodthirsty; he relishes the idea of murder, and like the historical Dracula, he is adept at plotting war.

Not only is Byron truly immortal, but he can also “operate among the dreams of men” (653). The reference of operating in the dreams of men is a direct link to rocket engineer Franz Pökler’s personifying a light bulb that was always on over his head to be a proxy of Weissmann’s evil, since he is a sadistic and evil character, here personified as the horrible presence of light itself. Pynchon writes, “[Pökler] dreamed that the bulb was



a representative of Weissmann, a creature whose bright filament was its soul” (427). All of these concepts connect Byron’s story, on several levels, with evil, even though upon a more casual reading of the text Byron seems like the light of reason, he’s actually thematically linked to the darker elements. The difference being that Byron, like Vlad the Impaler, is an iconoclast where the power structures of the technology cartels are hierarchies with masses of individuals behind them, operating under many minds projecting an evil will. Byron’s transcendence is one example out of many, because energy as a symbol (for Pynchon) never dies or gets created, but instead, reforms through transformation. This same quote has been mentioned before, but it’s worth reprising since it links back to the opening quote of the book attributed to Wernher Von Braun, “Nature does not know extinction; All it knows is transformation. Everything science has taught me, and continues to teach me, strengthens my belief in the continuity of our spiritual existence after death” (1). Here the quote takes on a different and more chilling resonance, as it represents the transformation of evil energy, which is shown as being vampiric.

Pynchon’s constant allusions to episodes from European colonization illustrate this very same point again and again. On the other hand, the racially black Schwartzkommandos and their African ancestors are the very image of pure and natural version of mankind that racial whiteness will coopt, corrupt, and bleach out to the point of virtual non-existence. Of course, in a novel such as this, dealing with the notion of racial genocide and the Nazi “purification” initiatives, race is an unavoidable topic. The character Oberst Enzian devotes his life to the service of the rocket while occupying a role as a leader, or “Ngarorerue”<sup>38</sup>, to the Schwartzkommando located in the Zone

(German territory divided among the allies post-war). Enzian's own racial identity, which is mixed Russian and Herero, and his emotional and sexual relationship with Captain Weissmann deeply resonates with the fate of the rocket and even the fate of humankind. I argue that this concept can be viewed as racial *bleaching*,<sup>39</sup> making an identity *whiter* and thus more malignant and less natural, as per the conjecture of this work, which is to illustrate how whiteness is representative of dark themes.

Since techno-power is now dictating the fate of individuals and nations, it has grown powerful indeed. This is the meaning of Pynchon's curious ending to his book: where the rocket finds you, the reader, wherever and whenever in time you may be, in your present time. The shift in the chronology of the story at the end of the book proves that, thematically, the rocket is capable of time travel. Lawrence Buell shares this vision, although I dispute his interpretation. Buell writes:

The rocket is fired due north, a direction militarily useless [...] But detailed narration is deferred till the very end, and by juxtaposing the 00000's 1945 ascent with the descent of the 1970s rocket on the L.A. theater, as if the two missiles must be one and the same. As, symbolically, they are (436).

The extension of this idea actually pulls the reader into the symbolic action of the rocket's meaning and implications. From the current vantage point, the Los Angeles Orpheus theatre ending seems mired in the past. But when *Gravity's Rainbow* was published, it would have been contemporary timing for anyone reading the book. The prophesized rocket at the end is Pynchon's "Perfect Rocket", your personal, branded rocket meant for your personal annihilation which is "still up there, still descending [...] and with it an explosion that will take [you] by surprise" (426). We are all invited by Pynchon at the conclusion of the book to sing a song about how every last preterite shall

be found, and has no hope of being passed over any more, by this evil new god personified by the holders of the rocket's power. The allusions to the "old" monotheistic god are many here, but one primary example would be the idea of Passover, the holiday, when the first born sons would be harvested by deity unless certain religious rites were undertaken which would allow that family to be "passed over" for that year. The mechanized future it portends is a terrible fate, indeed. This is the vision of the world if the power-hungry cartels and regimes are allowed to thrive, either in secret or out in the open. And monsters like Weissmann (modeled on Von Braun) enjoy a fruitful future in the United States among academics and the upper echelon of powerful minds.

Noteworthy as well is the fact that at the last section of his book, Pynchon switches into a curious second person narration, where *you* are being dictated the action all the way through to the end. This second person invokes the reader's present time (again, vs. narrative time, as in *Moby-Dick*) and harkens directly back to Janet Reno's insights on Ishmael commanding, "Call me Ishmael", and later, "Friends, hold my arms," (2, 465). It is the very same energy of storytelling, where you are invited, or doomed, to participate in the inevitable annihilation waiting just above your very own head at this very moment. A close reading of the song at the end of *Gravity's Rainbow* supports my hypothesis. "There is a Hand to turn the time, Though thy Glass today be run," writes Pynchon (760). The "Hand" in question no longer belongs to god but to his usurper, perhaps Captain "Blicero" Weissmann; "Hand" is capitalized to highlight the new omnipotence (760). Turning the time is a nod to symbolic time travel, mentioned before. "Till the Light that hath brought the Towers low Find the last poor Pret'rite one...", the Light mentioned is clearly that of the rocket fuel burning and the felled towers are of

course the bombed out cities of the post-WWII landscape, or, worse yet, a post-apocalyptic future landscape where every city is destroyed in such a manner. “Till the Riders sleep by ev’ry road, All through our cripl’d Zone, With a face on ev’ry mountainside, And a Soul in ev’ry stone... Now everybody—” is evoking imagery where dead riders are scattered throughout the Zone’s decimated landscape.

Or, alternately, every rocket is equipped with a rider, like Gottfried, within it, which echoes Ahab inside the whale. Since the rocket is a phallus and encasement within it is tantamount to being a symbolic sperm inside the phallus, Gottfried is the seed of the white, Aryan heir to the rocket future. Another reading of the same image may infer that the riders are those of each soul sacrificed through dark arts to the Nazi rocket effort, as being ghostly entombed in the rocket itself and sent to seek out and hunt its prey until it smashes into the landscape sleeping by every road where it lands and being that face on every mountainside and the soul embedded in the stones of the crash site (760).

Unfortunately, Lawrence Buell is unable to decode any meaning whatsoever from the central image of Pynchon’s special rocket, and writes, “the 00000 is totally useless” and concludes that all of the book’s potent metaphysical rocket imagery is only trying to “underscore the weird superfluity of Nazi pallocentrism” (441). My arguments have shown how Pynchon has used specialisms and minute technical details to illustrate metaphysical beliefs deeply coded into his story. While not superficially evident, the spiritual content emerges specifically through the details written into the technical attributes of the rocket, the polymer Imipolex G and the “Story of Byron the Bulb”.

However, Pynchon is fond of film references as *Gravity’s Rainbow* is full of them and no doubt Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying*

*and Love the Bomb* made an impression on him when it was released in 1964. Kubrick's iconic ending is here, at least in part, being paid homage to, as each personal rocket carries with it its very own Major T. J. "King" Kong-type character, special just for your very own special obliteration. The satire and wit of the film would have appealed to Pynchon's sense of humor and provided a fascinating media piece to study on the madness of rocket culture. Such an explanation for the enigmatic ending to Pynchon's book is quite pleasing to those for whom the ending of *Dr. Strangelove* is one of the very best in cinema history.

Now that the beginning and the end of Pynchon's work has been decoded, an exploration into the connective crux of this thesis is needed. A discussion of Pynchon's use of light as malign concept provides a clear transition into Goethe's *Theory of Colors* and themes plucked directly from *Faust* can be seen operating directly in *Gravity's Rainbow*, which can be found in Stephen C. Weisenburger's notes on Part 3, 'In the Zone.' During an episode where the character Geli Tripping is introduced in the story, she and Slothrop converse and engage in sexual relations, during which Slothrop gets some pertinent information about the 00000 rocket he seeks. When questioned why she would offer up intelligence about rocket dealings to a war correspondent (which Slothrop is posing as at this point of the story), she offers a bit about herself: "I like you. I like intrigue. I like playing" (293). The episode that follows, of Geli and Slothrop atop the Brocken, is the climax of the novel because light as evil concept gets played out in symbolic spell work culminating in profane "God Shadows" and Tyrone Slothrop begins his disintegration of character right after (330). Geli Tripping describes for Slothrop how she once posed for a German emblem as a witch straddling an A4 rocket, "carrying her

obsolete broom over her shoulder”, to which Slothrop asks, “Are you a real witch?” (293). Geli answers, “I think I have tendencies. Have you been up to the Brocken yet? [...] I’ve been up there every Walpurgisnacht since I had my first period” (293). Shortly after this conversation, Geli takes him to the sacred Brocken mountaintop, “the very plexus of German evil” (329).

Weisenburger explains the reference to the Brocken, Walpurgisnacht<sup>40</sup> and how it ties into Goethe:

Jutting peaks of the Harz Mountains, site of the *Walpurgisnacht*, or eve of May Day, celebrations. In part 1 of Goethe’s *Faust*, on the night of April 30, Mephistopheles conducts Faust to the Brocken, an area known for its strangely beautiful light, the so-called *Brocken-Gespenst*, or Brocken specter. Goethe (*Goethe’s Color Theory* 89) experienced it in December 1777 (184).

The explicit mention of the *Brocken-Gespenst* serves as a link between Goethe, Melville and Pynchon. It is significant that the crux of Pynchon’s novel plays out atop the Brocken. Pynchon is seen to be channeling *Faust* and Goethe and Pynchon even mentions Mt. Greylock specifically in connection to this episode, referring back to *Moby-Dick*. Weisenburger then quotes Goethe’s own comments about this real-life experience in his life, which inspired much of his later writing and theories<sup>41</sup>. Weisenburger explains the significance of Goethe’s ideas:

Goethe had witnessed the phenomenon of complementarity across the rainbow spectrum of colors. The moment would spark him to use Germanic legend to situate his demonic festivities in *Faust* atop the Brocken; it also inspired his scientific researches into “the color wheel”—a way of representing the color complements in a circular, mandala form (184).

Goethe's real-life experiences atop the Brocken Mountain inspired his inventions of the color wheel, which is still used today. Here the full thrust of Goethe's influence on Pynchon comes into focus. In this epicenter of *Gravity's Rainbow*, as Tripping and Slothrop await the sunrise atop the Brocken mountain; Pynchon describes the scene:

“By golly,” Slothrop a little bit nervous, “it’s the Specter.” You got it up around Greylock in the Berkshires too. Around these parts it is known as the Brockengespenst. God-shadows. Slothrop raises an arm. His fingers are cities, his biceps is a province—of course he raises an arm. Isn’t it expected of him? The arm-shadow trails rainbows behind as it moves [...] Not ordinary shadows, either—*three-dimensional* ones, cast out on the German dawn, yes and Titans *had* to live in these mountains, or under them... Impossibly out of scale. Never to be carried by a river. Never to look to a horizon and think that it might go on forever. No trees to climb, no long journeys to take...only their deep images are left, haloed shells lying prone above the fogs men move in. (330)

At this pivotal, ritualistic center of the novel, Slothrop is as close to divinity as he will ever get. He is given the special opportunity to manifest a different destiny for himself, yet he only profanes the atmosphere and squanders his chance at finding the Schwarzgerät or resolving his past. First Slothrop recognizes the phenomenon as “the Specter” (330). This is Pynchon’s code word for Captain Wiessmann, who is meaningfully described on page 666<sup>42</sup> as “the Zone’s worst specter”, whose “power is absolute” and who is “growing whiter” (666). The white specter is the “local deity” of the German zone, which is the “Kingdom of Lord Blicero. A white land” (485-6). Slothrop “raises an arm” in a Nazi salute, symbolically to Weissmann, because it is “it expected of him,” then engages in lighthearted, pseudo-sexual enactments with Geli Tripping (330). Their monstrous “God-shadows” engage in only meaningless games in the “the very plexus of German evil”, which characterizes Slothrop’s entropic function in the novel (329).

This episode at the center of *Gravity's Rainbow* substantiates the claim that light and whiteness is directly connected to profoundest evil. After his aborted divine experience atop the Brocken, Slothrop turns into a caricature of himself engaging in plots that play out like cartoons. This intersection of ideas is made that much more pertinent to this thesis, as the view of Mt. Greylock in the Massachusetts Berkshires is the supposed inspiration for *Moby-Dick* and the view Melville saw while writing the novel. This direct link brings full-circle my connecting Melville and Pynchon with Goethe's experiences and the scientific study of the color prism they inspired via *Theory of Colors*. The visible spectrum of light, the rainbow, is mentioned following the above passage as well. Pynchon writes, "The spectra wash red to indigo, tidal, immense, at all their edges. Under the clouds out there it's as still, and lost, as Atlantis" (331). Red to indigo is Goethe's invention, it is the round color wheel that was inspired by his real-life experience atop the Brocken. This connection proves that the color symbolizing methodology that is active in both novels is, in fact, operating from the same well-spring of inspiration in color theory.

Light has been shown in both *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Moby-Dick* to spring from the same well of information via Goethe's *Theory of Colors*. Whiteness and light has also been shown to be sinister in nature, far from the common assumptions and associations of light or white objects and characters being godly, good and pure. Rather, light symbolism is complex at the least and evil at the extreme end of the spectrum. This is a heritage of ideas present in several other American novels previously mentioned, such as in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. The light symbolism as malignity theme would make for fascinating future study. This lens of inquiry may have been hinted at in divergent critical



approaches to literature but it has never previously been collected in one document focused on the topic of expressing how light symbolism is dark in meaning in American literary fiction.

## Chapter IV

### Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to argue that Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* mirrors and reinvents Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. The arguments have unfolded in several specific, thematic trajectories. The primary intersection has been established as the direct semiotic link between the function of the central image of rocket and whale. It has been illustrated throughout this work that Pynchon's Schwarzgerät is the reimagined White Whale, reprised anew for modern readership. The second lens of inquiry explored how both novels fit the unique critical framework required by Edward Mendelson and Andrzej Kopcewicz under the rubric of an "Encyclopedic Narrative" genre of literature, wherein the books are shown to share many thematic and stylistic idiosyncrasies. The next point of entry was shown to be that both Melville and Pynchon utilize light and whiteness to symbolize profound darkness. The thesis also explored how scientific terminology and technical analogies can reveal the authors' metaphysical and spiritual beliefs through a deeply encoded symbolism that emerges when the technical data is critically analyzed or decoded. Many other tangents of inquiry have been engaged to follow how Pynchon's literary mirrors reflect *Moby-Dick*.

Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* is the thematic model on which Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* is based. These two American icons of literature rely on highly technical language (i.e. the jargon of science, engineering, and other professional specialisms) to express spiritual beliefs. Throughout each novel, the technical language

has been shown to code the ineffable and the transcendent, allowing for an entry point to understand the functions of symbolic material. Codes such as those inherent in Imipolex G and the Schwarzgerät, once deciphered, allow for a spiritual philosophy to emerge from the book. For Herman Melville, Ishmael's thorough and scholarly attendance to his subject illustrates how one might transmute the force of hate to that of love. For Thomas Pynchon, we are able to discern that the urge for ultimate power is always an evil urge; the power structures inherent in the modern world are inherently corrupt to the most extreme degree, not only on a socio-political level, but also on a metaphysical one.

The primary symbols have been shown to be the whale and the rocket, which become a thematic links between both novels. The symbology at work in the large framework structure of *Moby-Dick* presents the book itself as white whale, likewise the iconic white whale can be read as a giant book. It is necessary to recognize these overarching symbols, as they partially construct the fragile metaphysics of the authors' intent, as has been illustrated in previous chapters. The literary form of *Moby-Dick* is constructed as a circular loop, the action aboard the *Pequod*, as told by Ishmael, have occurred in narrative the past. As has been established in the preceding chapters, the book's fictional author Ishmael is the narrator, scholarly annotator, protagonist and writer of the text. His voice is separate from Melville's, and they each have their own agendas and motivations. In this way of understanding the multi-layered epic, *Moby-Dick*, many ambiguities and thematic problems are resolved within the novel and the reader can fully appreciate how Melville's purposeful framework and construction has embedded into the text a metaphysical message of love and a deep understanding of nature.

Similarly in Pynchon, the book itself is conceived of as a rocket, this one symbolically in flight using a parabolic flight path from the ending where the experience is made real for the reader to the beginning, where the detonation is evidenced. It is not, as Lawrence Buell has argued, Gottfried's rocket that annihilates you at the end, but rather the "Perfect Rocket", specially attuned to ensure each individual's personal annihilation with no preterite clause option (except one, not to read the book) (426). Stephen C. Weisenburger's lauded *Gravity's Rainbow Companion*,<sup>43</sup> which contains some of the foremost scholarship on *Gravity's Rainbow*, Weisenburger argues that "[f]or Pynchon, fictions followed from [...] facts, and they all participate in the stunningly ambiguous cyclical structure of the novel" (3). What Weisenburger means about the cyclical structure" is the purposeful timeline that spins the narrative in a circumlocuting trajectory. The structure is actually parabolic. In the beginning of the novel, the plot opens when a "screaming comes across the sky", announcing a bomb blast (3).

This thesis argues that it is the very same bomb blast that *you* cannot hear at the end of the book because *you* are the victim of it. This clever trick of tenses and second person narration is Pynchon's method of reader engagement since he has mentioned many times in the text that the V2 breaks the sound barrier. He writes: "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" (7). The actual description of what is occurring at the end is envisioned by Capt. Geoffrey "Pirate" Prentice a few pages into the book: "What if it should hit *exactly*—ahh, no—for a split second you'd have to feel the very point, with the terrible mass above, strike the top of the skull", this very second

person usage of “you” serves a dual purpose, it could be Pirate musing to himself, but it is actually Pynchon speaking to the reader (7).

Kopcewicz has claimed that both novels have a unique way of their “method of linking images into one integral, autotelic whole” (37). This thesis has attempted the same scope by presenting the over-arching frameworks and laid them one atop the other as a sort of map of intersection of previously divergent-seeming parts. Many similarities have been unearthed, yet many more connections could potentially be made to further this claim. For example, this inquiry could be expanded in the future to include the polarity of darkness, a feminine perspective, and thus the receiving end of all the white, willful masculine energies here discussed. Noteworthy is Katje Borgesius’ polarity to Dominus Blicero, as she has been referred to as Domina Nocturna, which sets up the feminine darkness to complement images of masculine light force. Similarly, the character Greta Erdmann can be read as a surrogate womb to birth the new rocket god, which sheds light on one of the more mysterious passages of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Greta is dressed in a suit of Imipolex G by Weissmann and his cronies and regains consciousness days later to find the building she’s been in abandoned, no explanation is ever given by Pynchon of what actually occurred. Greta is also the ghost mother by proxy to Ilse Pokler, which establishes her role as a spectral mother figure in the novel. An analysis of both the *Pequod* and the *Anubis* as mirror ships would be most welcome comparative scholarship. Solving the mystery of Pynchon’s horse ritual on the heath and finding resonance with Pip’s shark sermon would also be fruitful, or as would be linking Melville’s astrological ideas present in the Doubloon chapter with Pynchon’s tarot card readings for his characters, as they are both esoteric predictive methods. There are many

more connective threads in the material than the scope of this thesis would allow me to follow. Yet it is my contention that a unique approach has been brought to the literary criticism which has revealed a pattern of connections that prove that *Gravity's Rainbow* is actually a reimagined *Moby Dick* for a late 20<sup>th</sup> century audience and beyond. *Moby-Dick* is a love song to a whale. *Gravity's Rainbow* mirrors this, and becomes a dark love song to a rocket, much like the song that ends Pynchon's novel. The trajectory of inquiry into both *Moby-Dick* and *Gravity's Rainbow* leads to a rich comprehension of the metaphysical material the authors have coded so deeply into the technical content of their masterworks of iconic American fiction.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See the work of Lawrence Buell; Andrzej Kopcewicz, Edward Mendelson, for arguments of this kind.

<sup>2</sup> A similar point of view is found on p. 40 in Kopcewicz, Andrzej. *From Moby-Dick to Finnegans Wake : Essays in Close Reading*. 8 Vol. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2012. Print.

<sup>3</sup> Additionally, Ahab's white scar is symbolic of the whale's whiteness.

<sup>4</sup> As seen on pp. 62, 68. Schollars, Todd J., USAF. "German Wonder Weapons: Degraded Production and Effectiveness." *Air Force Journal of Logistics* 34.3/4 (2010): 60-75. Print.

<sup>5</sup> Whales are, of course, mammals. I use the word "fish" in the idiomatic sense in keeping with Melville.

<sup>6</sup> This reference is to the Behaviorist experiments and implants that Tyrone Slothrop may have been the victim of, which are hinted at throughout the novel. These experiments and implants may explain Slothrop's uncanny predilection for forecasting London bomb-strikes via personal sexual activity.

<sup>7</sup> Page 126. Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick: Or, the Whale*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1979. Print.

<sup>8</sup> Levitsky, Zhana. "'Let There Be Light': A Discussion of Light Motifs in Three Classic American Novels." Harvard University, Extension School, Cambridge, MA, 2010. Unpublished Paper. Print.

<sup>9</sup> Typically, within the Western literary tradition, black symbolizes bad and white symbolizes good.

<sup>10</sup> Levitsky, 1-19.

<sup>11</sup> Levitsky, 1-19.

<sup>12</sup> Levitsky, 1-19.

<sup>13</sup> Frost, Robert. "Design." Poets.org. Web. 22 Jan 2015. [<http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/design>].

<sup>14</sup> See Reno, Janet. *Ishmael Alone Escaped: "Moby-Dick" as a Survivor's Narrative*, 1983. Print.

<sup>15</sup> See Reno, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> For example, Lawrence Buell understands Ishmael as a stand-in for Melville's own voice and makes no clear distinctions between the two varied narrative functions.

<sup>17</sup> When Ishmael recounts his visiting of a whale skeleton-turned-temple in Chapter 102, *A Bower in the Arsacides*, he writes, "The skeleton dimensions I shall now proceed to set down are copied verbatim from my right arm, where I had them tattooed; as in my wild wanderings at that period, there was no other secure way of preserving such valuable statistics. But as I was crowded for space, and wished the other parts of my body to remain a blank page for a poem I was then composing—at least, what untattooed parts might remain [...]" (461).

<sup>18</sup> This idea is supported by Douglas Robillard's *Melville and the Visual Arts: Ionian Form, Venetian Tint*. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1997. Print.

<sup>19</sup> Visible, of course, to the human perspective. There exist many other forms of "light" that we do not associate as such, because we cannot see them with our basic human faculties.

<sup>20</sup> Eisberg, Robert Martin. *Quantum Physics of Atoms, Molecules, Solids, Nuclei, and Particles*. Ed. Robert Resnick. 2nd ed. ed. New York: Wiley, 1985. Print. Relevant quote: "For both large and small wavelengths, both matter and radiation have both particle and wave aspects [...] But the wave aspects of their motion become more difficult to observe as their wavelengths become shorter [...] For ordinary macroscopic particles the mass is so large that the momentum is always sufficiently large to make the de Broglie wavelength small enough to be beyond the range of experimental detection, and classical mechanics reigns supreme." (59-60).

<sup>21</sup> Mendelson, Edward. "Encyclopedic Narrative: From Dante to Pynchon". *MLN* 91.6, Comparative Literature (1976): 1267-75. Print.

<sup>22</sup> The implication here is the fate of the Nazi rocket program being coopted by the U.S. government and Wernher Von Braun conducting rocket test launches historically on U.S. soil to prepare America for the Space Race and NASA's Apollo missions.

<sup>23</sup> Philbrick, Nathaniel. *Why Read Moby-Dick?* New York, NY. 2011. Print

<sup>24</sup> Examples include: Chapters 32- Cetology, 74- The Sperm Whale's Head, 75- The Right Whale's Head, 80- The Nut, 86- The Tail, 103- Measurement of the Whale's Skeleton and others.



<sup>25</sup> Titled, *Been Down So Long it Looks Like Up to Me*. Bibliographic information: Fariña, Richard. *Been Down so Long it Looks Like Up to Me*. New York: Random House, 1966. Print.

<sup>26</sup> April 1, 1966

<sup>27</sup> Pynchon, Thomas. "Richard Farina." Introduction. San Narciso Community College *Pomona.edu* Web. 2 Oct. 2014. [<http://pynchon.pomona.edu/uncollected/farina.html>].

<sup>28</sup> The reference here is specifically to Kopcewicz: "Even a cursory reading of *Gravity's rainbow* will reveal striking similarities with *Moby-Dick* – not only in the function of its central metaphor – but also in its teleologically presented reality, its admixture of fact and fantasy, the baroque language, use of colour symbolism, Yankee humour, myth and mythography, magic and ritual, and finally in its method of linking images into one integral, autotelic whole" (37).

<sup>29</sup> Edward Mendelson, pp. 1267-1275 and Andrzej Kopcewicz, pp. 35-41.

<sup>30</sup> This is one of the thousands of examples of how Pynchon blurs the line between the sacred and the profane, subverting the classical with the ironical.

<sup>31</sup> Or, for Pynchon, film references, satirical songs, biblical mis-quotations, etc.

<sup>32</sup> The versions consulted for this thesis are as follows: Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick; Or, the Whale*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979. Print. And Pynchon, Thomas. *Gravity's Rainbow*. New York: Viking Press, 1973. Print.

<sup>33</sup> This is an allusion to Pynchon's section 3 prologue, which reads, "Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas any more...-- Dorothy, arriving in Oz" (279).

<sup>34</sup> This phrase is from Lawrence Buell, p. 441.

<sup>35</sup> Scientist and creator of Imipolex G, Emulsion J, and Oneirine.

<sup>36</sup> The "full length of" what? What isn't being said here is phallus, or rocket, as they're here interchangeable, as they are throughout almost the entire novel.

<sup>37</sup> The behaviorist conditioning experiments and possible implants made that infant Tyrone Slothrop was subjected to can evidence this idea.

<sup>38</sup> "The word doesn't mean "leader" exactly, but "one who has been proven" (Pynchon, 316).

<sup>39</sup> This idea stems from European blood being introduced to African blood through the reality of European colonization of the African continent.

<sup>40</sup> Eve of May Day. Weisenburger quoting a *Life Magazine* article from 1945, which Pynchon used as reference: “On the eve of May 1, according to German legend, weird witches whip wildly through space, riding broomsticks and goats, with long-tailed monkeys under their arms. On their mad way they bring blight, drain cattle dry, spread havoc. They gather at the *Teufelskanzel* (Devil’s Pulpit) on Brocken and hark to the exhortations of their master, the devil. Then, after devouring a great dinner of toads and mice, they dance and revel until dawn around the bonfire lit before the pulpit. In 1933 the celebration of this pagan ritual called Walpurgisnacht (Walpurgis was a medieval saint) was adopted as a ceremonial of the Hitler Youth. Until this year they gathered from all over Germany on Brocken, which is the highest peak of the Harz mountains southeast of Hanover, and listened to the demoniacal diatribes of their leaders” (203).

<sup>41</sup> Goethe writes: “During the day, owing to the yellowish hue of the snow, shadows tending towards violet had already been observable; these might now be pronounced as decidedly blue, as the illuminated parts exhibited a yellow deepening to orange. But as the sun last was about to set, its rays greatly mitigated by the thicker vapors began to diffuse a most beautiful red color over the whole scene around me, the shadow-color changed to a green, in beauty to the green of an emerald. The appearance (Gespenst) became more and more vivid: one might have imagined oneself in a fairy world, for every object had clothed itself in the two vivid and so beautifully harmonizing colors” (qtd in Weisenburger 184).

<sup>42</sup> Page number 666, with its connections to Satan and evil, is specifically devoted to discussion of Captain Weissmann’s insidious power.

<sup>43</sup> The 2<sup>nd</sup> edition is being referenced, which was published in 2006.

## Bibliography

- Buell, Lawrence. *The Dream of the Great American Novel*. Cambridge: Harvard Belknap Press, 2014. Print.
- Conte, Joseph M. (Joseph Mark). *Design and Debris : A Chaotics of Postmodern American Fiction*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002. Print.
- Cooper, Peter L. *Signs and Symptoms : Thomas Pynchon and the Contemporary World*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983. Print.
- Cotkin, George. *Dive Deeper : Journeys with Moby-Dick*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. Print.
- Dalsgaard, Inger H., Luc Herman, and Brian McHale. *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Print.
- Eisberg, Robert Martin. *Quantum Physics of Atoms, Molecules, Solids, Nuclei, and Particles*. Ed. Robert Resnick. 2nd ed. New York: Wiley, 1985. Print.
- Fariña, Richard. *Been Down so Long it Looks Like Up to Me*. New York: Random House, 1966. Print.
- Fowler, Douglas. *A Reader's Guide to Gravity's Rainbow*. Ann Arbor: Ardis Publishers, 1980. Print.
- Friedman, Alan J., and Manfred Puetz. "Science as Metaphor: Thomas Pynchon and Gravity's Rainbow." *Contemporary Literature* 15.3 (1974): 345-59. Print.
- Frost, Robert. "Design." *Poets.org*. Academy of American Poets. Web. 22 Jan 2015.
- Giesenkirchen, Michaela. "'Still Half Blending with the Blue of the Sea' : Goethe's Theory of Colors in Moby-Dick." *Leviathan* 7.1 (2005): 3-18. Print.
- Glenn, Barbara. "Melville and the Sublime in Moby-Dick." *American Literature* 48.2 (1976): 165-82. Print.
- Greiner, Walter. *Quantum Mechanics : An Introduction*. 4th ed. Berlin: Springer, 2001. *Springer Link Online*. Springer International Publishing AG. Web. 16 Dec 2014.
- Kopcewicz, Andrzej, and Janusz Semrau. *From Moby-Dick to Finnegan's Wake : Essays in Close Reading*. 8 Vol. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2012. Print.

- Levitsky, Zhana. "'Let There Be Light': A Discussion of Light Motifs in Three Classic American Novels." Harvard University, Extension School, Cambridge. 2010. Unpublished Paper. Print.
- Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick; Or, the Whale*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979. Print.
- Mendelson, Edward. "Encyclopedic Narrative: From Dante to Pynchon." *MLN* 91.6, *Comparative Literature* (1976): 1267-75. Print.
- Moore, Thomas. *The Style of Connectedness : Gravity's Rainbow and Thomas Pynchon*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1987. Print.
- Otter, Samuel. *Melville's Anatomies*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. Print.
- Parini, Jay. "The American Mythos." *Daedalus* 141.1, *On the American Narrative* (2012): 52-60. Print.
- Pederson, Joshua. "The Gospel of Thomas (Pynchon): Abandoning Eschatology in Gravity's Rainbow." *Religion & the Arts* 14.1 (2010): 139-60. Print.
- Philbrick, Nathaniel. *Why Read Moby-Dick?*. New York: Viking, 2011. Print.
- Pynchon, Thomas. *Gravity's Rainbow*. New York: Viking Press, 1973. Print.
- . "Richard Farina." Introduction. San Narciso Community College *Pomona.edu* Web. 2 Oct. 2014.
- Reno, Janet. *Ishmael Alone Escaped: "Moby- Dick" as a Survivor's Narrative*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1983. Print.
- Robillard, Douglas. *Melville and the Visual Arts : Ionian Form, Venetian Tint*. Kent: Kent State University Press, 1997. Print.
- Schollars, Todd J., USAF. "German Wonder Weapons: Degraded Production and Effectiveness." *Air Force Journal of Logistics* 34.3/4 (2010): 60-75. Print.
- Schultz, Elizabeth A. *Unpainted to the Last : Moby-Dick and Twentieth-Century American Art*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995. Print.
- Sharp, Katherine Gibson. "'I Heard Beauty Dying': the Cultural Critique of Plastic in *Gravity's Rainbow*". Ithaca: Cornell University. Thesis. 2007. *Cornell.edu*. Web. 25 Nov. 2014.

Smith, Mack. *Literary Realism and the Ekphrastic Tradition*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995. Print.

Weisenburger, Steven C., *A Gravity's Rainbow Companion - Sources and Contexts for Pynchon's Novel*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011. JSTOR Books. Web. 10 Sept. 2014.