

# Forming Ecomasculinities through Deep Ecology in Gravity's Rainbow

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## Résumé de l'article

This article examines the concept of ecomasculinity—how masculinities and ecologies interact—through the lens of deep ecology, arguing (following Serpil Oppermann) that Pynchon's postmodernist boundary collapsing informs deep-ecological interconnections for male characters previously embroiled in negative cycles of patriarchal dominance. Ecomasculinity is an important emerging concept within ecocriticism, and recognising links between the positive iterations of masculinity and ecology that the ecomasculine seeks to express and the philosophy of deep ecology furthers the conversation about the utility of deep ecology to contemporary society.

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# Forming Ecomasculinities through Deep Ecology in *Gravity's Rainbow*

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Victoria Addis

Men and masculinities have long been associated with narratives of dominance. Reflecting on the history of Western masculinities (a history of imperialism, expansionism and capitalist enterprise), the connections between these expressions of male power and the denigration and exploitation of the planet are plain to see. Ecomasculinity<sup>1</sup> — a discourse concerned with how masculinities and ecologies interact — seeks to uncover and examine more positive constructions of masculinity that interact with the world from a position of care and responsibility (Slovic 2004). Discussing positive examples of being a man in the world provides a necessary and important counternarrative for contemporary Western societies experiencing a rise in the threat posed by anti-feminist and far-right ideologies supported by disenfranchised, young white men (Kimmel 2013, 2018). This counternarrative does not seek to challenge or subvert critiques of the patriarchy, or of the connections between (white) male dominance and the oppression of the natural world that ecofeminism as a discipline has exposed and described — as Greta Gaard explains, the basic premise of ecofeminism “is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, gender, class, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature” (1993, 1). Indeed, the work of ecofeminists has been crucial to understanding the interrelationships of systems of oppression and to building a framework for critical discussions about the relationship between gender and nature. Despite its broad focus on positive visions of masculinity, ecomasculinity as a concept does not necessarily run counter to the concerns or conclusions of ecofeminism. Scholars working in this area have been open in their agreement that “men and masculinities have been complicit in the lion’s share of our global and social environmental problems” (Hultman and Pulé 2018, 8). Ecomasculinity, then, can be described as an expansion of the concept of masculinity within the framework of ecofeminism.

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<sup>1</sup> A note on terms: as part of an emerging field of enquiry, many of the key terms at the heart of this article are still in development, with consistent usage between scholars not yet established. ‘Ecomasculinity’ (Brandt 2017) and ‘Ecological Masculinities’ (Hultman and Pulé 2018) have both been used to describe a conceptual/discursive framework relating the relationship between masculinities and ecologies. Emerging from within a literary critical context consistent with my own approach, ‘ecomasculinity’ is my preferred term throughout this article, though ‘ecological masculinities’ has been used in relation to the work of Hultman and Pulé specifically. I use ‘ecomasculinities’ and ‘the ecomasculine’ to refer to ecomasculinity as praxis, avoiding the term ‘eco-man’ suggested by Mark Allister (2004) in recognition of distinctions between gender and biological sex.

Building on an anti-essentialist approach to ecofeminism expressed by scholars like Victoria Davion (1994), which rejects the idea that women are more connected to nature than men and instead seeks to overcome these binary distinctions, ecomasculinity challenges the use of masculinity as a placeholder for patriarchy, and strives to uncover the breadth and depth of possible masculinities, and the many ways those masculinities interact with nature in real and fictive contexts. Ecological masculinities (Hultman and Pulé 2018) offer and explore alternative pathways for expressions of manhood that promote an attitude of care towards both local environments and wider planetary networks, what Hultman and Pulé call the “glocal commons” (165). They recognise the necessity for broader scope both in the discussion of masculinities as non-homogenous gendered identities and in the conceptions of the relationship between masculinity and the natural world, which itself is understood in wider terms. As Mark Allister explains:

There is no “nature” that is stable or foundational. And when we see that nature has numerous and shifting roles — sometimes existing as an idea, or as a commodity, or as the “pure” entity for those who want to attack what is more obviously human made — then we are able to acknowledge how complex are the relations between this larger view of nature and masculinity. (2004, 6)

These recognitions move us beyond the divisions and hierarchies which have traditionally been established between the natural and the human and allow for a breadth of alternative visions for masculinities in fiction and beyond.

Thomas Pynchon’s 1973 novel *Gravity’s Rainbow* fuses postmodernist themes with an environmentalist outlook to create a narrative consistent with the tenets of deep ecology. This article examines the discourse of ecomasculinity through the lens of deep ecology, arguing that Pynchon’s postmodernist boundary-collapsing informs deep-ecological interconnections for male characters previously embroiled in negative cycles of patriarchal dominance. Through a focus on extreme interconnectivity, Pynchon’s novel dismantles the binarism of traditional Western thought (man/woman, humanity/nature), represented in the novel through a plethora of disturbing father figures, and in so doing lays the groundwork for a radical ecomasculine, or deep-ecological masculine, identity: one built on a sense of equality with the rest of the natural world, and, moreover, a complete embeddedness within it. The foundations for this new expression of manhood are constructed through binary-collapsing reorientations of the self, including gender blending, psychic phenomena, and a rejection of man/nature divisions. The radical ecomasculine in *Gravity’s Rainbow* understands masculine and feminine as social constructs and is therefore released from gendered expectations to enjoy ‘gender blending’ as an expression of the unedited self. It experiences psychic phenomena which destabilise boundaries between self and other and extends that through a connection to the more-than-human world, recognising the consciousness of the planet and of all life contained therein, and communing with that world on equal terms. The prototype of the radical ecomasculine is formed in the novel through the journey of Tyrone Slothrop. His eventual ecological awakening is,

however, prefigured by other characters, including Pirate Prentice, Roger Mexico, and Lyle Bland, as well as his own ancestor, William Slothrop, all of whom embody the ecomasculine in slightly different ways.

This article is concerned primarily with ecomasculinity as an emerging discourse within ecocriticism. As a literary/cultural discourse, ecomasculinity seeks to explore the relationship between masculinities and the environment in literature and the arts in ways that draw out the complexities and multiplicities of both realms. Professor Stefan L. Brandt (2017, 2018) has been at the forefront of this endeavour in the field of American literature. He has described the journey of ecomasculinity across American literary history as a movement between three key narratives: 1) the romantic ideal of the man-in-nature inherent to early frontier narratives (James Fenimore Cooper) and later revived in line with American transcendentalism (Emerson, Whitman and Thoreau), 2) the cult-of-manliness at the centre of turn-of-the-century, post-frontier writing (Zane Grey and Owen Wister), which persisted in the work of modernist writers like Hemingway and Steinbeck, and finally, 3) postmodern ecomasculinities, which “fundamentally challenged the traditional perspective on the concepts of ‘masculinity’ and ‘wilderness’ by criticizing their underlying patriarchal assumptions” (2018, 15), providing a “counter-discourse to the long-cultivated rhetoric of masculine self-affirmation and rejuvenation through acts of appropriation of the natural environment” (2017, 139). Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* is perhaps the postmodernist novel, and it evidences many of Brandt’s key arguments regarding postmodern ecomasculinities. Pynchon, for example, challenges the tradition of man-in-the-wilderness tropes in American fiction through his trademark use of humour and pastiche, and through a depiction of the wilderness as a polluted and thereby compromised space that can no longer support such ideals. He also challenges patriarchal narratives of power and progress and the binary structures that place barriers between categories such as masculine and feminine, humanity and nature, and even humanity and technology. Further to Brandt’s framework, Pynchon’s novel engages with large-scale questions about human and more-than-human relationships that interact with a world embedded in science, technology, information, and war. Unlike the authors Brandt examines (Cormac McCarthy, Annie Proulx), Pynchon’s novelistic setting — Europe towards the end, and in the aftermath, of World War II — necessarily embraces the hallmarks of a postmodern culture in addition to its postmodern narrative aesthetic. Pynchon’s representations of science, technology, and paranoid cycles of information-gathering inform wider debates about ecological interconnectivity and the sphere of responsibility. The ecomasculine prototype that emerges from Pynchon’s novelistic universe, therefore, is truly placed at the intersection of deep ecology and postmodernism in its broadest sense.

The philosophy of deep ecology was developed by the Norwegian environmental philosopher Arne Naess. Building on his belief in the fundamental interconnectedness underlying all nature, as propounded in his personal philosophy termed Ecosophy T, Naess emphasises the intrinsic value of all things within that wholeness, a concept he calls “biospherical egalitarianism” (Naess 1974, 95). As Bill Deval explains, in deep ecology, “[m]an is an integral part of nature, not over or

apart from nature. Man is a ‘plain citizen’ of the biosphere, not its conqueror or manager” (Deval 1980, 310). Pynchon’s novel expresses this idea most keenly in the way it integrates the natural and the man-made. While technology is often shown as a destructive force in the novel, for example through the polluted area surrounding the Imipolex factory (579), it is also shown to be a force that is fully imbricated in the natural, whether through the attribution of consciousness to the man-made as in the case of Byron, the freedom-fighting lightbulb, the crumbling, bombed-out building Slothrop encounters on his journey through the Zone (519), or through the many interconnections between the individual and the technological, most prominently evidenced in Slothrop’s connection to the rocket.

Serenella Iovino describes these connections between the human and the human-made as an “entanglement of agencies” (Iovino 2012, 455). In order to emphasise the impossibility of drawing an accurate distinction between these agencies, she asks: “From laboratories to cars, from our clothes to our food, and the natural-industrial-technological chains by which all these things are produced: where does human agency begin as completely independent from the nonhuman” (455)? By connecting the human firmly with the human-made, Pynchon’s novel asks the very same question: to what extent is technology a part of its creators, of those that use it, or of those that are otherwise connected to it? In the case of rocket 00000, it is made, like other V-2 rockets, from the material Imipolex, which connects physically to the human body through the erotic properties experienced by both Slothrop, through his erections, and by Greta, a silent film star with dark proclivities, at the Imipolex factory: “The moment it touched them it brought my nipples up swollen and begging to be bitten. I wanted to feel it against my cunt. Nothing I ever wore, before or since, aroused me quite as much as Imipolex” (578). This property heightens human sexuality in a way that suggests Imipolex is an *agent* of pleasure as much as a conduit.

The relationship between the human and the human-made is further illustrated in the parallels between Gottfried and the rocket. Gottfried is a young soldier under the command of Captain Blicero (the SS code name for Major Weissmann). Blicero keeps the young Gottfried imprisoned with a Dutch girl — the spy, Katje — forcing them into bizarre sexual games. These games, conceived around the dynamic between Hansel, Gretel, the Witch, and the Oven-as-rocket (Rouyan 2013), are intended to “fatten Gottfried up” for his eventual destiny. The rocket is also linked to Blicero as its creator. As such it is completely bound up with Gottfried, and with the processes that went into creating them both:

The two, boy and Rocket, concurrently designed. Its steel hindquarters bent so beautifully...he fits well. They are mated to each other [...] His bare limbs in their metal bondage writhe among the fuel, oxidizer, live-steam lines, thrust frame, compressed air battery, exhaust elbow, decomposer, tanks, vents, valves...and one of these valves, one test point, one pressure-switch is the right one, the true clitoris, routed directly into the nervous system of the 00000. She should not be a mystery to you, Gottfried. (891)

The presentation of Gottfried and the rocket as “concurrently designed” and the overt sexuality of the image completely upend any distinction between the human and the human-made. The rocket, whether as a phallic symbol or as a woman, “should not be a mystery” to the boy who has been through Blicero’s sexual conditioning. The joining of Gottfried and the rocket is the apotheosis of Weissmann/Blicero’s fantasy, which he has succeeded in realising to the extent that they are almost inseparable. Just as the rocket is described in the language of female anatomy, Gottfried also absorbs elements of both the feminine and of the technological or human-made: “In one of his ears, a tiny speaker has been surgically implanted. It shines like a pretty earring” (891). In tying the biologically human to the human-made so completely, Pynchon’s novel suggests that human creation, for good or ill, is akin to creation in the natural world, which is to say that within the logic of the novel, the V-2 rocket is as natural as a beaver dam or a termite mound.<sup>2</sup>

Kate Soper explains such a view as the position of deterministic naturalism, which “would have us regard human culture as itself no less a part of nature than the culture of other species” (59). One of the major problems with this perspective, of course, is the issue of environmental responsibility. If everything we as humans do and make is natural, just a part of who we are as a species, then any ramifications borne from our innovations can be dismissed. This is not the position that the narrative of *Gravity’s Rainbow* takes, however. In foregrounding the interconnections between science and technology and the human as a natural being, Pynchon’s novel does not excuse or minimise environmental disregard or damage. In the world of the novel, Slothrop is as much a weapon as the rocket is, and, indeed, when the product is viewed as part of the self or selves that created it and which use it, culpability is much more difficult to escape. *Gravity’s Rainbow* refutes the erasure of responsibility by explicitly underlining the direct links between technology — its use and misuse — and individual human decision-making:

All very well to talk about having the monster by the tail, but do you think we’d’ve had the Rocket if someone, some specific somebody with a name and a penis hadn’t wanted to chuck a ton of Amatol 300 miles and blow up a block full of civilians? Go ahead, capitalize the T on technology, deify it if it’ll make you feel less responsible- but it puts you in with the eunuchs keeping the harem of our stolen Earth for the dumb and joyless hardons of sultans, human elite with no right at all to be where they are. (617)

Through its emphasis on “some specific somebody with a name and a penis,” this passage suggests that the individual — perceived here as the explicitly male individual — must bear the responsibility for any environmental damage they or their inventions cause. Those who seek to blame this destruction on some detached notion of capital-T-technology are condemned and emasculated. They are eunuchs supporting the powerful elites through their subscription to the

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<sup>2</sup> This is not to refute but rather to complicate readings that highlight Pynchon’s representation of plastic and other man-made technologies as simply a perversion of the natural, seeking to reach beyond what it is to be human.

myth of a deified or rarefied Technology. Responsibility, Pynchon's novel argues, cannot be avoided through such frameworks. While this idea of interconnectedness with a maintained emphasis on responsibility is, I would argue, representative of that of the novel as a whole, there are competing views of the relationship between the human and the natural at play within the narrative.

The differing views on the relationship between humanity and nature that populate the novel, are, in general, split along generational lines: the older characters are often beholden to a binary, dualistic worldview, whereas the younger generation is shown to hold the potential for greater equality, both within society and across the wholeness of the universe of which humanity is a part. The characters that expressly 'other' the natural world are those that take the role of colonisers, polluters, and patriarchs. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, these identities are firmly interlinked:

In the last third of his life, there came over Laszlo Jamf. . . . a hostility, a strangely *personal* hatred, for the covalent bond. A conviction that, for synthetics to have a future at all, the bond must be improved on — some students even read 'transcended.' 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 were not shared, but captured. *Seized!* and held! (683-87, emphasis in original)

Here, we see Jamf in his role as a scientist working on synthetic materials. Jamf is the creator of the plastic known as Imipolex, which, as we observe earlier in the novel, is responsible for polluting the landscape surrounding the factory where it is produced: "Nothing grew there. Something had been deposited in a great fan that went on for miles. Some kind of tarry waste" (579). But Jamf isn't remotely concerned about the environmental cost of his work. His denigration of the soft, feminine interconnectivity of the covalent bond, which is at the heart of all carbon-based life (including, to his dismay, himself), demonstrates his fundamental belief in the hierarchical structures of traditional Western thought, which place the feminine and natural beneath the masculine and the cultural/technological. His sense of humiliation at the idea of sharing bonds, even on a subatomic level, reveals his need to control and to dominate. Jamf's blinkered desire to push the boundaries of the human-made at any cost connects to his admiration for the ionic bond, which he expresses in the language of war and of colonisation: to capture, to seize, to hold. The characters that other nature are those who are, and who remain, willingly complicit in these systems of control and domination. As Patrick McHugh observes, evil in *Gravity's Rainbow* is presented through these very cultural phenomena, "the institutions, and the individuals of western patriarchal society" (3-4). From Pointsman's exploitation of his canine subjects, to Captain Blicero's campaign to conquer nature and erase death, these characters preside over a form of society built on the exploitation of nature, women, minorities, and the otherwise disenfranchised, which the novel critiques and rejects.

These evil figures are, as defenders of a patriarchal world order, often cast in the role of fathers. This can be seen in Jamf's formative impact during Slothrop's childhood — it is he who conditions the infant Tyrone's response to Imipolex — and in Blicero's connection to Gottfried, whom he raises to join with the mythical rocket 00000. As Derek Maus has observed, Pynchon is "using and confusing the metaphor surrounding fathers and offspring to demonstrate this manner in which European imperialism absurdly misrepresents its violent actions as the necessary result of a benign fatherly love" (196). These various interconnections link the paternal to the colonial, to systems of control and domination, and ultimately, to death: "Fathers are the carriers of the virus of death, and sons are the infected..." (Pynchon, 858). The representation of fathers as bringers of death and destruction is based fundamentally on the representation of a changing worldview within the novel: from the linear and mechanistic world order we see reflected in the novels' father figures, to the unified and rhizomatic logic of the narrative itself, which bleeds into characters like Roger Mexico, Lyle Bland, and, eventually, Tyrone Slothrop. Yet if Pynchon is keen to celebrate the current generation against the former, he is also eager to reach back into history and locate that point at which the U.S. could have rejected the example of these European fathers and made a better world.

In seeking to examine the present, its likely future, and any hope for a better future, Pynchon returns to a particular crossroads in U.S. history: the new world. For Pynchon, early America "was a gift from the invisible powers, a way of returning. But Europe refused it" (857). There was a point in time, Pynchon argues, at which America could have chosen a different path, one of integration with, and respect for, the natural world, rather than following the path laid down by pre-existing European attitudes. That this did not happen is a point of consternation within the novel. The lost opportunity is discussed through Tyrone's ancestry, beginning with William Slothrop:

William Slothrop was a peculiar bird. He took off from Boston, heading west in true Imperial style. . . . He was one of the first Europeans in. After they settled in Berkshire, he and his son John got a pig operation going. . . . William wasn't really in it so much for the money as just for the trip itself. He enjoyed the road, the mobility, the chance encounters of the day — Indians, trappers, wenches, hill people — and most of all just being with those pigs. They were good company. (657)

William's disinterest in financial concerns is tied in this passage to the connection he feels with the pigs he looks after: "[h]e enjoyed the road, the mobility [...] and most of all just being with those pigs." This underpins Pynchon's message throughout the novel that commercial interests are often opposed to environmental ones and places William on the side of the environment within that framework. In a widely condemned treatise inspired by his experience with his pigs as creatures that "have faith in William as another variety of pig, at home with the Earth, sharing the same gift of life," William "argued holiness for these 'second Sheep,' without whom there'd be no elect" (658). Motivated not by financial gain, but by the "trip itself," and driven to defend



the rights of all life to exist on equal terms, William Slothrop is the seed of a better society, which failed to flower: "Could he have been the fork in the road America never took, the singular point she jumped the wrong way from? Suppose the Slothropite heresy had had the time to consolidate and prosper" (658)? The idea that the preterite and the nonhuman, which are here conflated, have as much value as the so-called elect is an ethic that is clearly prized in Pynchon's novel. That subsequent generations of Slothrops moved away from this philosophy to become increasingly driven by commerce at the expense of the natural world is presented as a symptom of this missed opportunity.

Tyrone Slothrop is first introduced in the novel, after mention of his hard-on, through his ancestry, and in particular, through the epitaphs on his ancestors' graves, beginning with Constant Slothrop (d.1776): "*Death is a debt to nature due/Which I have paid, and so must you*" (31). The sentiment of Constant's epitaph is one that pits man against nature in a way that William, the earliest Slothrop, would have resisted. After William, the Slothrops move away from feeling any affinity with the natural world, and instead seek to master it:

Constant saw, and not only with his heart, that stone hand pointing out of the secular clouds, pointing directly at him, its edges traced in unbearable light, above the whispering of his river and slopes of his long blue Berkshires, as would his son Variable Slothrop, indeed all of the Slothrop blood one way or another, the nine or ten generations tumbling back, branching inward: every one, except for William the very first, lying under fallen leaves, mint and purple loosestrife, chilly elm and willow shadows over the swamp-edge graveyard in a long gradient of rot, leaching, assimilation with the earth. . . . (31)

The contrast between William's "assimilation with the earth" and the possessive language employed to describe his descendants' relationship to the natural world: "the whispering of *his* rivers and slopes of *his* long blue Berkshires" [my emphasis], shows with what speed the European impulse to dominate asserted itself in the new world. This domination is underlined by the industry the Slothrops make their own.

Slothrop's ancestors made their money by exploiting natural resources, firstly as fur traders, and eventually by setting up in the paper business (32). One of the ways Pynchon centralises Slothrop's ancestral history within the novel is through the use of paper as a symbol for the processes and effects of domination across multiple registers; social, political, and environmental. Throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*, paper is used as a shorthand for bureaucracy and for socially and politically constructed boundaries that bear little relation to physical reality:

It is not death that separates these incarnations, but paper: paper specialities, paper routines. The War, the Empire, will expedite such barriers between our lives. The War needs to divide in this way, and to subdivide, through its propaganda will always stress unity, alliance, pulling together. (154)

In this, and other, similar passages, Pynchon emphasises the lie behind the rhetoric of unity disingenuously employed by the upper echelons, but also the fragility of that lie: nothing more than a piece of paper. Beneath these connections between paper and bureaucracy there is, of course, an environmental cost to the production of paper, which connects these aspects of Christian Europe powered by the paper trade: war, commerce, empire, etc., to environmental damage.

At the outset of the novel, Tyrone Slothrop remains, like his immediate forebears, largely indifferent to nature:

Slothrop grew up in a hilltop desolation of businesses going under, hedges around the estates of the vastly rich, half-mythical cottagers from New York lapsing back now to green wilderness or straw death, all the crystal windows every single one smashed, Harrimans and Whitneys gone, lawns growing to hay, and the autumn no longer a time for foxtrots in the distances, limousines and lamps, but only the accustomed crickets again, apples again, early frosts to send the hummingbirds away, east wind, October rain: only winter certainties. (33)

As a young man, Slothrop views his family's situation as part of a narrative of loss, and not loss as regards the despoliation of the environment, but loss of the society and civilisation that caused it. The green wilderness Tyrone sees returning carries no positive connotations for him; it is seen alongside "straw death" as a signal of decay. There is a lament to the language of "no longer," and "but only," which precedes the monotony of "crickets again, apples again." The young Tyrone is a man in search of people, and parties, while surrounded by nothing but empty houses and drab nature. We soon see, however, suggestions that young Slothrop has the potential to change:

the anarchist persuasion appeals to him a little. Back when the Shays fought the federal troops across Massachusetts, there were Slothrop Regulators patrolling Berkshire for the rebels, wearing sprigs of hemlock in their hats so you could tell them from the Government soldiers. Federals stuck a tatter of white paper in theirs. Slothrops in those days were not yet so much involved with paper, and the wholesale slaughtering of trees. They were still living for the green, against the dead white. Later they lost, or traded away, knowledge of which side they'd been on. Tyrone here has inherited most of their bland ignorance on the subject. (319)

This passage comes at the end of a discussion between Slothrop and the Argentinian anarchist, Squalidozzi. Squalidozzi laments the loss of open space and borderless freedom found in the early days of the Americas (specifically the South American context he inhabits), and sees, in the German Zone, a chance to try again at achieving that unified space: "No. Taking land is building more fences. We want to leave it open. We want it to grow, to change. In the openness of the German Zone, our hope is limitless" (315). While Slothrop's initial reply does nothing more than parrot establishment rhetoric: "that's progress — you can't have open range forever, you can't just stand in the way of progress" (315) — there is something about Squalidozzi's vision that

appeals to the anarchist values in his ancestral roots, before his family turned to the side of “paper.” This vision sticks with him, and resurfaces when he is ready to interrogate his inherited views:

It seems to Tyrone Slothrop that there might be a route back — maybe that anarchist he met down in Zürich was right, maybe for a little while all the fences are down, one road as good as another, the whole space of the Zone cleared, depolarized, and somewhere inside the waste of it a single set of coordinates from which to proceed, without elect, without preterite, without even nationality to fuck it up. (659)

This realisation signals a turning point in Slothrop’s journey. In questioning the fundamental necessity, even the morality, of borders, of property, of commerce, and of empire, Slothrop begins to form a new relationship with the world around him. In London, he was a man who drew stars on a map to log his sexual conquests, but in the Zone, he is becoming something else entirely.

Tyrone Slothrop begins the novel as a young, sexually driven, and relatively care-free American lieutenant, working for Allied Intelligence in London during WWII. As the narrative progresses, he is forced to confront the legacy of white European masculinity to which he is an heir. As the result of Pavlovian-style conditioning as an infant, Slothrop appears to get erections at the exact locations where V-2 rockets later land. Through this connection to German rocket technology, and, more specifically, the newly designed plastic, Imipolex, Slothrop’s sexuality, indeed his very selfhood, is weaponised by the structures of control fuelling the war. By the end of the novel, however, Slothrop has freed himself from the influence of the rocket, and from the constraints of linearity, binarism, and the mechanical worldview that they represent. In his seed-like scattering across the region known as the Zone, prefigured by his growing sense of connection to the natural world, Slothrop achieves both freedom and ecological embeddedness.

Slothrop’s transition through ecological awakening and into a state of embeddedness or interconnectivity complicates the man-in-the-wilderness trope central to American literature. Pynchon’s wilderness is not an idealised place acting as a proving ground for manly prowess as we have perhaps come to expect (Allister 2). It is a damaged place, wherein any such feats prove ludicrous:

Sometimes he manages to be alone out by the river, fishing with a piece of string and one of her hairpins. They manage a fish a day, on lucky days two. They are goofy fish, anything swimming in Berlin waters these days has to be everybody’s last choice. (528)

Catching “goofy fish,” deformed by the polluted waters of the city, undermines the skill and ingenuity of a catch achieved with a makeshift fishing line. In this scenario, we do not see a man taking control of nature through survivalist instincts, only a slightly comic figure, made so through

the unsightliness of the fish. A damaged, polluted environment cannot support the traditional visions of masculine self-fashioning in the wilderness that have historically been so central to the cultural frameworks of American life. Without this framework to draw on, Pynchon looks to the alternative, postmodernist spaces of the newly formed German Zone to contextualise Slothrop's transformation, and to a relationship with the natural world that rejects narratives of dominance.

Slothrop's journey towards ecological awareness begins in earnest when he arrives in the Zone. Lawrence Kappel distinguishes between London (1944) and Germany (1945), characterised as "the Zone," as a division between the real and the mythic. In the mythic space of the Zone, Slothrop is able to escape the control of a reality constructed by white European history and reinvent himself by shedding his ego and embracing humility: "The Zone is a place of purgation the fires of which can transform being into something new and magical" (226). In the Zone, Slothrop gains some amount of ecological awareness: "Trees, now — Slothrop's intensely alert to trees, finally"; he begins to realise, in direct contradiction of his immediate ancestry, "that each tree is a creature, carrying on its individual life, aware of what's happening around it, not just some hunk of wood to be cut down" (654). In his heightened awareness he accepts the trees as conscious beings, begins to shed his ego, and communes with nature, if not in earnest, then with a playfulness that does not go so far as the delegitimise the sentiment:

He's letting his hair grow, wearing a dungaree shirt and trousers Bodine liberated for him from the laundry of John E. Badass. But he likes to spend whole days naked, ants crawling up his legs, butterflies lighting on his shoulders, watching the life on the mountain, getting to know shrikes and capercaillie, badgers and marmots. Any number of directions he ought to be moving in, but he'd rather stay right here for now. (737-8)

The humour and irony of this passage parodies the man-in-nature ideals of romantic/transcendentalist fiction without betraying the genuine expression of joy in the interspecies communion Slothrop experiences. It is this very connection to the more-than-human world which preserves Slothrop's manhood and opens the door to his ecological awakening. In adopting the persona of "Plechazunga, the Pig-Hero" (672) while escaping his pursuers, Slothrop embraces humility. The role connects him across history to his ancestor, William: the pig farmer and original "fork in the road" (658) and facilitates his escape from his rocket-self. As Thomas Schaub states, "Slothrop's incarnations as a rocket and a pig emphasize human aspiration and humility or, in terms of the rocket's parabolic journey, the ascent and descent of the impulse to control life and conquer mortality (gravity)" (248). In embracing the pig over the rocket, Slothrop effectively neutralizes himself at the very moment the forces seeking to use his rocket abilities decide to neutralize him. Fortunately, he escapes castration when the Plechazunga-suit causes another to be castrated in his place: where the rocket would see his manhood taken, his transition to a mode of "biospherical egalitarianism" (Naess1974, 95), as evidenced through his embrace of the pig, preserves it.

Freed from the forces of control and influence that pursued his rocket-self, Tyrone Slothrop takes the final step towards ecological embeddedness as he begins to disseminate. Foreshadowed earlier in the novel by that transitional state between waking and sleeping wherein Tyrone finds himself “belonging Slothropless to some teeming cycle of departure and return” (236), his sense of a fixed and singular identity breaks down and he becomes “[s]cattered all over the Zone. It’s doubtful of he can ever be ‘found’ again, in the conventional sense of “positively identified and detained” (845). This scattering isn’t an annihilation, but a seeding. It is the basis for hope within the novel; a counter to the rocket-logic of the Western worldview:

So generation after generation of men in love with pain and passivity serve out their time in the Zone, silent, redolent of faded sperm, terrified of dying, desperately addicted to the comforts others sell them, however useless, ugly or shallow, willing to have life defined for them by men whose only talent is for death. (886-7)

This pessimistic outlook, dramatically underpinned by the rocket launch of the book’s closing pages, is pierced by the figure of the transformed Slothrop continuing to exist around the Zone: “Some believe that fragments of Slothrop have grown into consistent personae of their own. If so, there’s no telling which of the Zone’s present-day population are offshoots of his original scattering” (881). Therein, Pynchon’s novel argues, lies the hope for ecological and social justice in the future.

In establishing Slothrop’s journey from a tool of Western destruction and control, through a period of ecological awakening, and into a state of pure freedom and interconnectedness, the question then becomes: *how* is this accomplished? What is going on behind Slothrop’s characterisation, and his situation within the narrative that makes this journey possible? His ancestry is certainly part of the answer. That there was once a Slothrop (William) who reached toward an egalitarian relationship between himself and the rest of the world provides a basis for Tyrone Slothrop’s return to those values — if in a modified, postmodernist form. But beyond this idea of return is the need to upset the current prevailing order. Pynchon represents this disruption through the postmodern condition itself, by rupturing the borders between the human and more-than-human, between genders, and between individual consciousnesses.

The relationship between deep ecology and postmodernist fictions, like those of Thomas Pynchon, has been explored through a body of work by Professor Serpil Oppermann which began in the early 2000s. Professor Oppermann advanced the thesis that postmodernist works cannot be dismissed as mere surface play. According to Oppermann, postmodernist fictions have much to offer to ecocritical analysis, particularly where they engage with the aspect of postmodern discourse that “involves a thinking that transcends the binarism of Western thought, and thus avoids creating another totalizing theory based on old paradigms of duality” (2003, 21). In other words, where postmodernist texts reject binary logic, and demonstrate what Jean-Francois Lyotard famously called an “incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv), they partake in a form of

representation that shifts the traditionally defined dynamics of power between the human and the more-than-human. As Oppermann states:

Postmodernism emphatically dismantles disjunctive opposites, it opens space for mutually constitutive relationships between culture and nature. In this system nature is no longer perceived to be the Other. Therefore, it can no longer be treated in terms of power relations. (2006, 116)

The traditional discourse of dominance surrounding man/nature relations is therefore disrupted in postmodernist fictions.

From its outset, *Gravity's Rainbow* establishes a positive vision of postmodernism, which supports Oppermann's thesis. This positive vision is often formed through an explicitly ecological lens, as evidenced in the "topsoil in which anything could grow" (6) that adorns Pirate Prentice's rooftop garden. This topsoil is a masterpiece of postmodernist pastiche. It is a potent mix of manure, vomit, pharmaceutical plants and dead leaves, all left behind by a host of historical occupants. This mixture, "all got scumbled together, eventually, by the knives of the seasons, to an impasto, feet thick" (6). The contrast between the artistic and cultural connotations of the "impasto" and the earthly, bodily mix of ingredients, worries at the divide between nature and culture. This divide is then entirely eradicated by the image of nature as artist, working the soil-paint with the "knives of the seasons" (6). Human creativity, and the growth and fecundity of the natural world are thus not only equated in the novel, but inextricably connected as part of the same process.

The potential for positive change Pynchon identifies in a postmodernist outlook is underpinned by perhaps the only unambiguously good character in the novel: Roger Mexico. Roger is a dreamer, a lover, and a young man whose profession and personhood connect him to the postmodern. As a statistician concerned with probabilities, Mexico is connected to "the domain between the zero and the one" (65). Operating outside of any binary logic, Mexico is dedicated to the gradients of the in-between. In this, he is feared by Pointsman, who expresses his fears in terms which are familiar indicators of the postmodern:

How can Mexico play, so at ease, with these symbols of randomness and fright? Innocent child, perhaps unaware - perhaps - that in his play he wrecks the elegant rooms of history, threatens the idea of cause and effect itself. What if Mexico's whole *generation* have turned out like this? Will Postwar be nothing but 'events', newly created one moment to the next? Is it the end of history? (65)

In expressing these fears— the end of cause and effect, the end of history, concepts at the heart of discussions of postmodernity – Pointsman dismisses Mexico, as some critics have dismissed postmodernism, as involved in a form of play which lacks awareness or intention. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, these criticisms are rebuked by the overtly anti-capitalist and environmentalist messages underlying the surface play of the novel, and by the way in which Pynchon emphasises

the central concerns of the postmodern, namely the breaking down of traditional binarisms, as fundamental to a new, more ecologically just and socially fair society.

In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon expresses the potential for human (and particularly male) awakening to the wider unities of nature through two main characteristics, namely, experiences or abilities relating to psychic phenomena: shifting across consciousnesses, reaching between worlds, experiencing or being sensitive to the supernatural, and also through instances of gender blending. That these characteristics are fundamentally boundary-crossing has a strong resonance with the deep ecological thought which permeates such representations. As Warwick Fox observes, deep ecology is:

the idea that there is no firm ontological divide in the field of existence. In other words, the world simply is not divided up into independently existing subjects and objects, nor is there any bifurcation in reality between human and nonhuman realms. Rather all entities are constituted by their relationships. *To the extent that we perceive boundaries, we fall short of a deep ecological consciousness.* (196, emphasis in original)

Building on the idea of gender as “culturally mutable,” “variable,” “highly relational” and demonstrably separate from chromosomal sex (Sedgwick 1990, 27-28), Holly Devor defines gender blenders as “people [who] indisputably belong to one sex and identify themselves as belonging to the corresponding gender while exhibiting a complex mixture of characteristics from each of the two standard gender roles” (vii). While patriarchal systems often seek to emphasise the manly and masculine as the ideal modes of self-expression for men, gender blending recognises the masculine and the feminine as socially constructed categories and frees the individual self from strict conformity to either role.

The first, and arguably the most significant example of gender blending in *Gravity's Rainbow* is Captain Pirate Prentice. The feminine aspects of Pirate's characterisation are inextricably linked to his cultivation of his banana garden and to his psychic abilities. Pirate Prentice is a “fantasist-surrogate” (14), a gift, or perhaps affliction, which is also referred to as his “Condition” (13). Pirate Prentice can experience the dreams and fantasies of others, a skill which is used to free key political figures from their burden during wartime. The language of expectant motherhood, which is used in relation to this role, aligns Pirate strongly with the feminine. This is further underpinned through his cultivation of the rooftop banana garden and his nurturing of his fellow troops with his famous banana breakfasts. While tending his garden, Pirate is described thus:

Emptying his mind - a commando trick - he steps into the wet heat of his bananary, sets about picking the ripest and the best, holding the skirt of his robe to drop them in. Allowing himself to count only bananas, moving bare-legged among the pendulous bunches, among these yellow chandeliers, this tropical twilight.... (8)

The mixing of the decidedly masculine connotations of the “commando trick” with the rustic, feminine image of Prentice, “bare-legged,” gathering fruit in the “skirt of his robe,” explicitly blends signifiers of both traditional genders. Pirate’s cultivation of the (inescapably phallic) bananas adds further layers to the scene. Are we to view Pirate as an innocent debutante walking beneath the sexually threatening “pendulous bunches” of “yellow chandeliers,” or as a man connected to the earth through the virtues of nurturing and cultivation which have traditionally been coded as feminine, but which in fact act in service to a bountiful and generative form of masculinity?

Through his psychic abilities and his desire to cultivate and to nurture, Pirate functions as a precursor to both Lyle Bland and Tyrone Slothrop — men who eventually achieve a form of interconnectivity and embeddedness through their growing ecological awareness — yet Pirate fails to achieve this same freedom. This is due in large part to his inability to completely sever his ties to the old colonialist worldview and to the ongoing systems of control, represented in his work for the elusive Firm, that such a worldview engenders. Pirate is racist. He denigrates other races as “beastly Fuzzy Wuzzies” and “horrid blacks” (15). This imperialist attitude is bound up in the novel with themes of pollution and despoliation, which prevent Pirate from achieving a true sense of interconnectivity with the world: “This smoke is more than the day’s breath, more than dark strength — it is an imperial presence that lives and moves” (30). Pirate’s connection to the Firm assures his alienation. While his colleagues enjoy the latest of his banana breakfasts, Pirate receives a call from his clandestine employers. The sense of comfort and connection elicited by the breakfast is ruptured by the political realities, the bureaucracy, and the implicit power dynamics signalled by the phone call, and Pirate is made an outsider:

He gazes through the sunlight’s buttresses, back down the refectory at the others, wallowing in their plentitude of bananas, thick palatal of their hunger lost somewhere in the stretch of morning between them and himself. A hundred miles of it, so suddenly. Solitude, even among the meshes of this war, can when it wishes so take him by the blind gut and touch, as now, possessively. Pirate’s again some other side of a window, watching strangers eat breakfast. (13)

The Firm in *Gravity’s Rainbow* is one of the many faceless organisations that thrive on the alienation of the individual, and work to promote the dark shadow of interconnectivity: paranoia. While Pirate continues to capitulate to his masters and the worldview they represent, he cannot find freedom despite the narrative markers for interconnectivity afforded to his character.

The potential of gender blending as a route to ecological interconnectivity is represented in a different way in the relationship between Roger Mexico and Jessica Swanlake. Their relationship is perhaps the only genuine love connection in the novel. The pair have a wartime affair, wherein their connection becomes such that their individual identities are intermittently confused:

And there have been moments, more of them lately too — times when face-to-face there has been no way to tell which of them is which. Both at the same time



feeling the same eerie confusion...something like looking in the mirror by surprise but...more than that, the feeling of actually being joined...when after — who knows? two minutes, a week? they realize, separate again, what's been going on, that Roger and Jessica were merged into a joint creature unaware of itself...In a life he has cursed, again and again, for its need to believe so-much in the trans-observable, here is the first, the very first real magic: data he can't argue away. (45)

Roger and Jessica's process of merging and separating is not merely a sexual joining, it is a merging of identities and the creation of a third order of being, "a joint creature unaware of itself." This relationship not only facilitates a radical form of connection between the lovers, it also allows them to transform themselves, and, in so doing, to access a wider sphere of experience. When their relationship ends at the close of the war, Roger is left distraught by a higher order of loss than that of Jessica alone: "He is losing more than a single Jessica: he's losing a full range of life, of being for the first time at ease in the Creation" (745). Abandoning the division between genders, and, indeed, the division between selves, Jessica and Roger gain admittance to the unity of Creation as a whole. It is this that Roger laments the loss of with such feeling.

Returning to Slothrop within this wider context of an established connection between gender blending and an increased affinity with the natural world in the novel, we find several indications that suggest a feminisation of Slothrop's character, beginning as he enters the Zone:

Slothrop feels his heart, out of control, inflate with love and rise quick as a balloon. It is taking him longer, the longer he's in the Zone, to remember to say, *aw quit being a sap*. What is this place doing to his brain? (396, emphasis in original)

Slothrop senses the change in his own behaviour, emotions, and attitudes. Interestingly, this change isn't framed as a fundamental personality overhaul, but as a freeing of existing traits. Rather than closing down his emotional responses with a mental reminder to "quit being a sap," he finds himself forgetting to do so. Gender blending in *Gravity's Rainbow* isn't about changing the individual self, but about ceasing to conform to socially constructed ideals of masculinity against one's natural inclinations:

But there is the matter of Duane Marvy's Atomic Chili, which turns out to be a test of manhood. The champagne bottle is there within easy reach, but drinking from it will be taken as a sign of weakness. Once Slothrop would have been suckered in, but now he doesn't even have to think it over. . . . Slothrop sits guzzling the champagne like soda pop. (662)

Refusing to conform to gendered expectations frees Slothrop to become his natural self and rids him of another layer of control and domination, which underpins these narratives of

manliness. While he would previously have been “suckered in,” his experiences in the Zone have opened his eyes to a new way of being in the world.

Just as the boundaries between genders are disrupted in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, so too are the boundaries between individual consciousnesses: “When you’ve looked at how it really is,” he asked once, “how can we, any of us, be separate” (168)? Underpinning this is the mode of narration in Pynchon’s novel, which has been described as “transmarginal” (Melley 1994, 728) in recognition of the way the narrative moves from one character to another, across the boundaries of human/more-than-human, and animate/inanimate, without any clear distinctions. As Richard Hardack explains,

Through his use of radical free indirect discourse, consciousness itself is relentlessly ventriloquized or echoed, and located outside individual identity: some narrator absorbs, duplicates, and disperses the voices of characters s/he is discussing and, in so doing, decenters notions of self contained subjectivity and linear time. (Hardack 2010, 94)

The narrative impulse to decentre identities, and to create a “*consciousness without borders*” (Hardack 2010, 102, emphasis in original), underscores the conception of Creation as a unity or wholeness which features heavily in the novel. This interwoven consciousness that exists both in the novel’s narrative structure, and diegetically within the narrative, works to present the idea that an awareness of, and connection, to that greater sphere of conscious existence is a route to freedom from the “reality” prescribed by traditional Western structures. Characters that interact with this unity through psychic or supernatural phenomena are not necessarily transformed, as we see in the case of Pirate Prentice, but the potential for such transformation is nevertheless there.

Everything in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, from trees to light bulbs, can potentially have a voice that is able to communicate with receptive human characters. Pynchon attributes consciousness well beyond the human, describing trees that “creak in sorrow for the engineered wound through their terrain, their terrenity or earthhood” (870) and rocks with “a form of mineral consciousness not too much different from that of plants and animals, except for the timescale” (725). The relationship between psychic phenomena and ecological awareness is built through examples of direct communication between human characters and these more-than-human entities, such as Slothrop’s conversation with the trees (654), Frau Gnab’s uncanny ability to insult anything: “Ach, she’s fantastic. She knows by instinct - *exactly how* to insult *anybody*. Doesn’t matter, animal vegetable - I even saw her insult a *rock* once” (589, emphasis in original), and most explicitly, through Lyle Bland’s hallucinations:

Bland, still an apprentice, hadn’t yet shaken off his fondness for hallucinating. He knows where he is when he’s there, but when he comes back, he imagines he has been journeying underneath history: that history is Earth’s mind, and that there

are layers, set very deep, layers of history analogous to layers of coal and oil in Earth's body. (698)

During his hallucinations, Bland communes with the Earth in a way that profoundly changes him, and his attitude toward the environment. He connects directly to the Earth's consciousness, its "mindbody," and cannot return to his normal life in the wake of these revelations, "Because it's hard to get over the wonder of finding Earth is a living critter, after all these years of thinking about a big dumb rock to find a body and a psyche, he feels like a child again" (699). Eventually, Bland rejects his physical existence entirely in order to remain permanently on the other side, as it were; a form of astral plane on which he discovers all kinds of presences and an entirely new way of seeing the world (698). Like Slothrop's journey towards total interconnectivity, Bland's transition to another mode of being necessitates a rejection of the ego surrounding selfhood and individuality, and a connection to a wider sphere of being which complicates the very notion of the individual as something entirely discrete. The narrative of Slothrop's progress, then, explores a form of ecomasculinity which is based on the radical interconnectivity fundamental to deep ecology. This interconnectivity finds expression in the novel through the destabilisation of boundaries between the human and the more-than-human, between the masculine and the feminine, and between individual consciousnesses.

Ultimately, the ecomasculine in *Gravity's Rainbow* is not only formed through these markers of postmodern discourse, but also in response to the postmodern age. Traditional narratives of masculine self-fashioning in the wilderness are not available to men living with the tangible results of pollution and climate change, or those living within a framework that recognises the embeddedness of humanity within nature. Pynchon's novel therefore finds new ways to express the ecomasculine in relation to this position. It emphasises the relationship between ecological awareness and a new way of existing in the world, which recognises the limitations and redundancies of a mechanistic, dualistic worldview, and seeks to do better. It shows that humility is not the antithesis of manhood, but its saviour, that gendered expectations are an impediment to the natural self, and that the self does not exist in isolation from the rest of the world in either physical or conscious reality. In all of these things, the novel draws simultaneously on the discourses of postmodernism and deep ecology to form a radical ecomasculinity that eschews all borders, and that carries within it the hope for an ecologically and socially just future. The centrality of deep ecology to Pynchon's formation of the ecomasculine demonstrates the ways in which this philosophy can be part of the conversation surrounding this emerging discourse. More broadly, recognising these links between the positive, environmentalist iterations of manhood that ecomasculinities seek to express and the philosophy of deep ecology furthers conversations around the utility of deep ecology to contemporary society.

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