'Acting Out' and 'Working Through' Departure in Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge*

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Abstract

The present article explores the literary means by which Pynchon' *Bleeding Edge* (2013) approaches post-traumatic reactions to 9/11 at the personal and public levels. The post-traumatic reactions that LaCapra has defined as "acting out" and "working through" are explored in their aesthetic and ethical dimensions, mainly through the study of Pynchon's construction of narrative anticipation and his use of the elegiac tradition. I conclude that the novel might suggest a realignment of postmodern predicaments in reconciliation with the modernist tradition as a means to work through social and aesthetic trauma. I also contend that Pynchon problematizes his typical luddite approach to the posthuman by means of an allegorical use of communication technologies as a site for ritual mourning.

Keywords: Thomas Pynchon; trauma; 9/11; *Bleeding Edge*; elegy

In *Bleeding Edge*, the latest of his novels published so far (2013), Thomas Pynchon gives a fictional account of the circumstances that might have surrounded the September 11 attacks on the Twin Towers in 2001. Although narrated by a third-person omniscient voice, the novel follows the actions and thoughts of its main female character, freelance fraud investigator Maxine Tarnow, in free indirect style, along a quite conventional linear progression with occasional flashbacks, allowing full readerly identification with time, setting and main character.

In general terms, *Bleeding Edge* follows the typical narrative structure of a detective novel as Maxine's investigations try to unravel the many possible conspiracies behind the September 11 attacks. However, like in all of his narrative, the development of the typical detective plot is questioned as a literary commonplace by inducing the readers' disbelief in causal and even logical connections among plot lines and characters that are too many and too complex to follow. Also against the narrative conventions of detective plot structure, the novel's main story lacks a climax where the mystery is typically resolved to the satisfaction of a complacent reader. In Pynchon's previous fiction, these devices had the effect of inducing metafictional detachment in readers; a

sort of ironic response to the almost certain suspicion that people will never know who was actually behind the attacks of September 11. While this is also the main effect in most of *Bleeding Edge*, in this novel he decided not merely to omit the typical detective climax, but to replace it with a most moving lyrical lament for the victims of 9/11. Although moments of lyrical intensity are not totally absent from Pynchon's fiction (e.g. the retirement house mattress in *The Crying of Lot 49* or Slothrop's long shadow in *Gravity's Rainbow*), they certainly run contrary to the general tone of his typically ironic, intellectual, emotionally detached style. In a novel about September 11, a reader who is familiar with Pynchon's previous fiction would expect a climax describing the attacks amidst the excessive obscenity of slaughtered bodies with a high probability of entropic, apocalyptic orgy in the elevated underworld of the Twin Towers (cf. Black Hole of Calcutta in *Mason& Dixon*). But in the face of a historical event that Pynchon himself bore witness to (unlike his previous fiction), ironic self-detachment might simply not be a narrative option anymore. In this one novel, the lyrical lament for the dead compels readers to engage in the mourning process of *working through* the 9/11 trauma in an *empathically unsettling* way that combines emotional engagement with critical distance.

The critical terms "working through" and "empathic unsettlement" were developed by Dominick LaCapra (2014) in the context of trauma studies to describe ethically committed responses to historical trauma that would not involve the vindictive infliction of more trauma in an endless compulsion to replicate the original traumatic historical event. In the context of trauma studies, LaCapra has described such compulsive repetition as "acting out" trauma; a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder. To LaCapra, acting out historical trauma relates to surrogate identification with either victim or perpetrator and often results in the construction of narratives of exclusion; narratives that promise a future redemption by excluding (blaming, terminating) some "Other." Typical narratives of exclusion that act out historical trauma incorporate devices such as compulsive repetition of the traumatic event based on a non-distinction between past and present lived experience, dissociative lack of emotion leading to excessive victimage or monstrosity (the making of clear-cut distinctions between helpless victims and willing perpetrators), and fetishization. On the other hand, though working through trauma often includes responses typical of acting out, it also involves what

LaCapra describes as "empathic unsettlement." In order to counter the negative effects of compulsively repeating (acting out) past historical traumas in the present, empathic unsettlement requires engaging a certain critical, self-reflective distance from past experiences. This critical self-reflective distance precludes full identification with either victims or perpetrators and allow for an ethical and political response in the "here and now with openings to the future" (LaCapra 2014: 22) and poses a barrier to either redemptive or apocalyptic closure (LaCapra 2014: 41).Vashem has suggested that there might be a parallelism between LaCapra's discursive symptomatology of historiographic acting-out trauma and literary features typically ascribed to Postmodernist art that would allow for a reading of postmodern (Western) literature as a surrogate traumatic, acting-out response to WWII (LaCapra 2014: 179-180). The often too light tone in postmodern artistic representations of traumatic experience or its fetishization into kitsch consumerism might be interpreted as symptoms of dissociative emotion; excessive forms of the carnivalesque or the monstrous might reveal surrogate identification with victims or perpetrators; intertextual evocations through pastiche (nostalgic or not) actualize previous texts in an ever-present reenactment or repetition of past artistic forms that might well be read as expressing obsession or a certain Bloomean anxiety of influence. While the typically postmodernist literary features listed above seem to point to surrogate artistic expressions of acting out the Holocaust, there is one pervasive postmodernist device that can be related to processes of working through traumatic experience. By establishing a critical distance from fictional suspension of disbelief, metafiction may allow for the self-reflective response that is required in working through mourning processes that distinguish past from present experiences (including artistic forms) and thus permit an affective, ethical response that is necessary in overcoming ethic and aesthetic trauma. In this sense, metafiction can be a powerful narrative device to prevent redemptive or apocalyptic foreclosure in trauma narratives. However, if this self-critical distance is not balanced by eliciting some form of emotional engagement in readers, trauma narratives may fail to have an empathically unsettled effect. In *Bleeding Edge*, this balance is provided by the lyrical climaxes developed in chapters 28, 39 and 40.

Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* has the particularity of being a post-traumatic postmodern novel about traumatic events that he directly

witnessed and affected him personally. However, these events were also experienced in the public sphere through highly mediated—though also minute-by-minute—reports, thus allowing for these events to be simultaneously lived as past and present compulsive repetition of trauma and reported with virtual critical distance and identification at the same time. There is an interest in exploring how the postmodern formulas of surrogate posttraumatic narration apply to a type of historical trauma that might be providing both immediate identification and critical distance.

In the first part of *Bleeding Edge*, the ghostly anticipation of an imminent loss (namely, events taking place before the attacks) is combined in subsequent plot development with empathic modes of working through such loss that involve an allegorical use of virtualized experience in the second part of the novel (events taking place after the attacks). The traumatic event itself is represented in chapter 29 as a climactic "loss," that is, a climax expected by readers that is nonetheless elided from the text, and only indirectly reported and mediated by live TV news.[1] The climax anticipated by posttraumatic anxiety proleptically depicted in preceding chapters and culminating in chapter 28 is deferred to a lyrically heightened elegiac lament in chapters 30 to 40 that elicits empathic engagement in readers. In this article, I contend that the first part of *Bleeding Edge* anticipates traumatic response to the 9/11 attacks by means of a proleptic narrative that acts out a surrogate identification with the victims. This first part is however balanced in the second part of the novel, which proposes working through the more immediate, non-

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[1] Within the context of trauma, LaCapra distinguishes between "lack," "loss" and "absence" in relation with time. While "as loss is to the past, so lack is to the present and future" (LaCapra 2014: 53), absence "applies to ultimate foundations in general, notably to metaphysical grounds" (LaCapra 2014: 50). He would then interpret Derrida's most quoted assertion, that "there is no outside the text" [*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*], as indicative of a transcendental absence (LaCapra 2014: 56). In *Bleeding Edge*, the *lack* of textual details of the 9/11 massacre becomes only apparent in extratextual dialogue with readerly (remembered) experience of the worldwide, world-trade, obscene voyeurism of the media. Ontological *absence* is suggested by commonplace references to God's will at the end of chapter 28, but has already been accumulating by innumerable suggestive conspiracy plots the novel defuses to close by typically Pynchonian rhyzomatic deferral.

surrogate loss of 9/11 by means of an empathic unsettlement that creates the necessary space for aesthetic and historical critical distance.

In this novel, Pynchon's thematic and stylistic engagement with the present allows us to reconsider the alleged Postmodernist ironic detachment from political concerns as the aesthetic performance of acting out surrogate trauma. The combination of the elegiac lament with the postmodernist devices that elicit ironic detachment result in a complex trauma narrative that engages readers in a process of working through loss by means of empathic unsettlement. I will support this view by analyzing the thematic construction and stylistic features of some key passages representing each position as the novel unfolds towards a typically Pynchonian non-closure that can be interpreted in LaCapra's terms as forms of working through traumatic loss rather than mere metafictional devices targeting meaning deferral.[2]

The passages chosen for this purpose are temporally grouped by their occurrence either before or after chapter 29, where the September 11 attacks take place in story time. Thematically, this division also splits into private and public responses to traumatic loss both before and after the attacks. While private responses are mainly constructed around the sexual motif, public responses explore forms of national trauma within a wider frame of national epics. In both cases the novel develops from a first part where dissociative lack of emotion leads to excessive victimage/monstrosity and fetishization to a second part where elegiac critical, self-reflective empathic unsettlement precludes full identification with either victims or perpetrators.

Passages representing private responses to trauma include two punctual sexual encounters: middle-aged fraudster VipEpperdew's porn movie with young and amoral Bruno and Shae in chapter 16, and main character freelance fraud investigator Maxine's encounter with war criminal Nicholas Windust at the safe house in chapter 24. Both passages take place before the September 11 attacks and depict compulsive,

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[2] Cowart similarly interprets *Bleeding Edge* through LaCapra's work. However, his final conclusions might slip into literary and historiographic redemptiveness when he claims that the novel targets neutralizing trauma rather than unsettling the reader's empathic response to it.

mechanized sexual relations deprived of any emotional attachment among participants.

In both cases, deviant sexual practices are not celebrated as the expression of free sexual choice, but morally condemned as the enactment of processes of economic and gendered victimage and monstrosity that characters submit to as they are unable to stop reproducing the roles and actions at the core of their traumatic experience. It could be argued that since it is Maxine who morally disapproves of such practices, the fact that they are condemned merely serve to portray her and not to determine the moral stand of the novel. Yet other elements pertaining to setting (typically Pynchonian entropic forms including pervasive dirt, decay and disorder), reinforce the novel's moral condemnation of these sexual practices as deviously monstrous.

The Vip episode takes place in a neighborhood of "[t]imebattered houses," where a "dirt road" leads to a house "littered with beer and vodka bottles, glassine envelopes, unmatched shoes, pizza boxes and fried chicken containers" (2014: 177). Similarly, Windust's safe house is described as somewhat apocalyptic: a "rental building, unfashionable, forsaken, due someday for demolition and replacement" (2014: 257) with a buzzer that has never worked, and "[w]alls glisten[ing] unhealthily in creepy yellows and grime inflected greens, colors of medical waste" (2014: 258). In this building, "[c]arpeting has been removed from the hallways. Leaks are not being fixed. Paint hangs. Fluorescent bulbs on borrowed time buzz purplishly overhead" and "wild dogs live in the basement and begin to come out at sundown, to roam the halls at night" (2014: 258). Inside Windust's apartment, Maxine finds "months of unvacuumed debris on the rug" (2014: 258) and a kitchen where "[t]here are suggestions of blue-green mold" (2014: 259).

As readers are morally detached from the sexual experiences depicted in these episodes through identification with Maxine's "yenta reflexes" (2014: 178) and through the descriptions of setting, this effect is reinforced by the characters' emotional detachment from their sexual experience, which is portrayed as a mechanical compulsion they submit to, in a way that makes it difficult to discern whether they are victims or perpetrators. In the Vip episode, characters engage in the sexual encounter under the effects of crack as they follow script directions that compel them out of their actual mood: Vip's "undisguisable yearning, which he quickly resets to party mode" for the sake of the camera only;

Shae's "little vacan[cy] around the eyes" and Bruno's "dick, frankly not big enough for the scenario, provoking expressions of annoyance from Shae and Vip whenever it approaches them for any purpose" (2014: 178). Still within the movie, but somehow off script, the sequence develops into its allegorical interpretation, which is something like financial porn gothic including financial intercourse and fetishization of a black card midway between sadist whip and phallic scepter that Vip threateningly lashes at Bruno and Shae: "The three get into a sub-vaudeville routine with [. . .] a black card that Vip keeps flashing at Shae and Bruno, causing them to recoil in exaggerated horror" (2014: 178-179). The light sub-vaudevillian tone lessens the gothic intensity as much as the fact that it is "routine" that causes Vip to collapse exhaustedly, and not the physical excess of the sexual encounter. Whatever he yearns for at the beginning of the passage is not satisfied by sex, which is depicted as the compulsive response to some undefined loss.

The playful tone in the Vip episode turns to a rawer exercise of sexual dominance in Maxine's encounter with Windust. Although no physical damage is inflicted on her and the sexual experience is highly satisfactory for both, it occurs all too suddenly to be the result of genuine arousal, taking both readers and Maxine by surprise. Instead, sexual arousal is depicted as the automated response to a direct imperative within a power dynamics establishing set roles of dominance and submission. Under the spell of "a sort of erotic snit," Windust "doesn't waste time: 'Get down on the floor [. . .] Now," and Maxine responds with "instant docility [and] slides to her knees" (2014: 258). The encounter is not only extremely detached from emotion— "God forbid there should be anything like eye contact around here" (2014: 259)—it is also mechanized as Maxine's body is compared to a videogame device and her feelings reduced to a mere "set of nerve receptors [. . .] used like buttons on a game controller" (2014: 258). Maxine's sexual encounter with Windust seems to *perform* the script of some sexual fantasy she reproduces as a symptom of her self-diagnosed "Romance Deficiency Disorder" (2014: 180); a traumatic response to loss of romance in her life.

No matter how divergent in their interpretation of Pynchon's representation of more or less deviant sexual practices in his novels, all critical approaches coincide in tackling this issue from the perspective of a de-humanized, mechanical, sexual economy of production and

exhaustion, power and knowledge, within the sociopolitical or mystical spheres (Stimpson 2003, Burns 1998, Carroll 1994, Jardine 1985, Kemeny 1994, Sears 2003). The negative assessment implied in this de-humanized picture of human relations reduced to mechanized sex is reinforced by the fact that it does not offer a positive alternative. In these novels, the sexual signifier remains endlessly floating as a desperate cry for meaning and textual closure. The fact that such despair is given a light tone in Pynchon's novels only adds up to intensify the reader's detachment from situation and character.[3]

As the sexual motif connects both passages, Maxine's degree of implication in them heightens (from surrogate mediated eye-witnessing to direct first-person physical experience), which mirrors the way in which she will traumatically react to the 9/11 massacre. The fact that the 9/11 attacks have technically not taken place in story time serves to shift the typically postmodern surrogate experience towards a proleptic, non-surrogate, future-perfect response to 9/11 that readers have access to by means of a dramatic irony building up narrative tension into the moment when characters are expected to experience non-surrogate loss.

This connection (not only thematic, but also stylistic) suggests a way of understanding the historical role of literary writing as a surrogate expression of post-traumatic loss. While the Vip passage evokes Nabokov's *Lolita* in character, situation and critical interpretation,[4] Maxine's orgasm in the second passage comes as the joint response to sexual stimulation and her coincidentally simultaneous vision of "the wronged soul of Lester" (2014: 259), possibly killed by Windust himself, in the shape of an—otherwise incongruent—mouse, in subtle intertextual reference to Spiegelman's graphic-art surrogate response to the

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[3] As early as 1900, Henri Bergson explained laughter as a reaction against "automatism" in human behavior (1999: 21). In the particular case of *Bleeding Edge*, presenting the compulsive repetitions that are symptomatic of acting out trauma as hilarious automatisms not only shows Pynchon's well-acknowledged Luddism, but also his rejection of "acting out" as a reaction to trauma.

[4] Nabokov, who taught Pynchon literature at Cornell in the late 1950s, arrived in the USA escaping the Nazis from France, where he had previously fled to from Berlin with his Jewish family. His subtly parodic contention of lyrical affect through intertextual emotional dissociation would fit into the pattern of Postmodernist traumatic literary compulsion.

Holocaust between 1980 and 1991.[5] Subtle as these references are, they should not be dismissed, even more as their postmodernist aesthetic statements are thematized into literary dialogue with Pynchon's novel.

In *Bleeding Edge*, when postmodern aesthetics depict present eye-witness experiences of loss (rather than post-traumatic surrogate experiences) they gain in subtle retrospection of strong lyrical force. Yet as argued above, this subtlety is not fully revealed until later passages. It is only while going through these later passages that readers can relate them to subtle hints that inadvertently anticipated action in previous chapters and that only build into lyrical lament when considered retrospectively.

Concerning the public sphere of surrogate trauma, a first reading of the most typically Pynchonian chapter 28 induces readers to position themselves at a safe ironic distance from its sexual references by omitting any element that might lead readers to engage emotionally with characters and/or situation. The chapter describes a crazy party that Maxine attends in the heights of an Italian palazzo. The party celebrates the financial excesses of the nineties, which are depicted as the compulsive repetition (acting out) of financial practices that would lead to the later flattening of the dotcom bubble. As the chapter unfolds, it adds typically Pynchonian entropic, pre-apocalyptic passages where an uncanny parallelism is constructed between pre-millennial threat of computer apocalypse and the days previous to 9/11:

> The theme of the gathering, officially "1999", has a darker subtext of Denial. It soon becomes clear that everybody's pretending for tonight that they're still in the pre-

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[5] Spiegelman's *Maus* is an obvious example of what LaCapra describes as acting-out surrogate trauma. His depiction of Jews as victimized mice and German Nazis as cats stands as pictorial evidence of fetishized victimage and monstrosity, while Spiegelman's projected persona in the novel acts out his parent's surrogate experience of the Holocaust as his own traumatic experience of his mother's suicide. In *In The Shadow of No Towers* (2004), Spiegelman, depicted again as a mouse, himself connects both posttraumatic experiences comparing Vlaked's description of the smoke in Auschwitz with the smoke in Lower Manhattan (2004: 3). Yet in this graphic novel, a critical self-distance from 9/11 causes in the reader an effect of empathic unsettlement precluding identification with either victims or perpetrators that is comparable to Pynchon's narrative response to 9/11 in *Bleeding Edge*.

cash fantasy years [. . .] with all here remaining freeze-framed back at the Cinderella moment of midnight of the millennium. (2014: 302)

Maxine progressively ascends to the reverse infra-world of the higher floor of the building where she meets the arch-fiend Gabriel Ice. Describing the party as she walks to the top of the building allows Pynchon to juxtapose scenes of compulsive financial excess where post-traumatic financial loss is depicted with a corresponding dissociative emotion in participants.

Like in the Vip passage, the light tone of the gathering dissipates the expression of emotion in characters while they engage in mechanical repetition of past experiences. As Maxine addresses Vyrva, there is "[n]o direct eye contact [. . .] her gaze wandering instead to the giant screens overhead" (2014: 304) "onto which bloom and fade loops of historical highlights" that appear as if they were subtitled by "vintage stock quotations from the boom-years NASDAQ crawl[ing] along a ticker display on a frieze" (2014: 302). Also Gabriel Ice's eyes are described as "less expressive than many Maxine has noted at the fish market" (2014: 310). Instead of partaking in the gathering with genuine joy, a "flow of dancers, drinkers and dopers" (2014: 309) party like mindless automata: "[p]artying everywhere. Sweeping into it, swept…" that are deprived of individual identity as they become mere "[f]aces in motion" (2014: 306).

Also like in the Vip passage, and despite the light tone of the gathering, the obscenity of financial excess is morally condemned by the narrative choice of a pervading presence of the scatological in the form of an ascending succession of toilets, where dirt, drug use, sex and extreme luxury metaphorically juxtapose with the more conventional use of the facility. The first toilet on the route

proves to be unisex and privacy-free. Instead of rows of urinals, there are continuous sheets of water descending stainless-steel walls, against which gentlemen, and ladies so inclined, are invited to piss, while for the less adventurous there are stalls of see-through acrylic [. . .] custom-decorated inside by high-ticket downtown graffiti artists, with dicks going into mouths a popular motif. (2014: 306)

In the next of these "halls of delusion," there is an "employee's lap pool with champagne empties bobbing in it" and a "parade of restless noses snorting lines of circular Art Deco mirrors" (2014: 306). Finally, the dirt of financial excess is obscenely fetishized by "a number of theme restrooms [. . .] dimmer and less elegant, seeking to evoke classic

downtown club toilets [. . .] and only one toilet bowl, distressed and toxic, which people have to queue up for" (2014: 306). The toilet tour ends in "the godfather of postmodern toilets" where a "six-by-six matrix of dancers perform the electric Slide" (2014: 307) to the music of a disco anthem celebrating the theme of the toilet. Rather than celebrated, the 1999 gathering is *acted out* through the compulsive repetition of behaviors showing emotional detachment caused by time displacement, and forms of monstrosity and victimage that operate as fetiches.

Stylistically speaking, most of chapter 28 is still typically Pynchonian, i.e. pre-climactic and emotionally detached as it builds up anticipatory tension by having readers allegorically *act out* their recollections of the 9/11 attacks from the compulsive, virtual reproductions on the public media. However, when merely scatological references scattered through the chapter attain fetishistic status at the numinous level, this passage makes readers position themselves ethically against the obscene way in which the media monetize trauma. Thus, Pynchon has characters wear T-shirts of ambivalent reading that flash into the readers' shared recollections of the attacks: "Y2K IS NEAR, ARMAGEDDON EVE [. . .] I SURVIVED" (2014: 302). He also has Maxineuncannily digress on how "[l]ater those who were here will remember mostly how vertical it all was. The stairwells, the elevators, the atria, the shadows that seem to plunge from overhead in repeated assaults on the gatherings and ungatherings beneath…" (2014: 303).

Since readers already know that disaster will follow celebratory excess, the description of such excess engages them in self-reflectively responding with aesthetic and empathic unsettlement. The fact that characters are negatively described in narrative time but that readers can anticipate their tragic fall as they celebrate, prevents readers from fully identifying with characters who are depicted as perpetrators, but also induces readers to identify with them as victims. This complex response to self-reflective irony and lyrical lament for the dead adjusts to LaCapra's description of empathic unsettlement in the mourning process of working through trauma. As the compulsive partying of the gathering repeats the financial excess of the nineties and allegorically advance the violent excess of the 9/11 massacre, a bridge is built for a recollection of the eighties full of nostalgic—though self-reflectively ironic—emotion:

> Not everybody benefits from a misspent youth. Teen contemporaries of Maxine's got lost in the club toilets of the eighties, went in, never came out, [. . .] The girl

> hours lost sitting in front of mirrors! The strange disconnects between dance music and lyrics [. . .] heartbreaking stories, even tragic, set to these strangely bouncy tunes… [. . .] and dance all night in the conjured world [. . .] where not everybody made it through, there was AIDS and crack and let's not forget late fucking capitalism, so only a few really found refuge of any kind… (2014: 308)

At the end of the two paragraphs (often interrupted by a lyrical use of ellipsis conveying contained emotion and occasional exclamations), Maxine refrains from crying midway between acting out and working through.

When the party is over and all its acting out of the nineties is left behind, anticipated tension breaks out into the lyrical explosion of a rhetorical question that reveals the full allegorical potential of the chapter. So at the end of chapter 28, as the "[f]ormer and future nerdistocracy" filter "back out the street" the narrator wonders "which of them can see ahead [. . .] to the shape of the day imminent, a procedure waiting execution, about to be revealed, a search result with no instructions on how to look for it?" (2014: 312).

The end of chapter 28 builds up narrative tension into the expected, though intentionally elided entropy of chapter 29, when the attack takes place in story time. But it also prepares readers for the elegiac climax of later passages. When readers reach those latter passages, they are retrospectively led to reassess their reading of chapter 28. In both elegiac climaxes, empathic detachment that should be interpreted as a form of acting out trauma is presented as a conscious, self-reflective way of containing emotion rather than as post-traumatic dissociation. It is not that characters cannot engage empathically because they are experiencing post-traumatic dissociation, but that their emotion is consciously contained as a result of their own self-critical approach to traumatic events.

At the private level, forms of fetishization, emotional detachment, sexual power dynamics of oppression and deviation act trauma out in *Bleeding Edge*. But in this novel, Pynchon seems to be using them within a wider narrative frame of elegiac lament by which these are used as expected postmodern narrative forms to be worked through by empathic and aesthetic unsettlement escaping full identification with either victims or perpetrators. The two passages analyzed above are counterbalanced in chapter 36, by two post-9/11 revisions where response to the loss of such supposedly mechanized sexual encounters reveals them to have been

based on a genuine feeling of affection that Pynchon refuses to call overtly love, but the suggestiveness of which is too lyrically close to conveying the emotion of love to be ignored. Both of them take place, not in the real world where the physical encounters took place, but in the virtual space of DeepArcher (homophonally, "departure"), a bleeding-edge technology with a complex code that makes the virtual experience (though onirically surreal) surprisingly realistic in detail, thus making it the perfect site for the ritual of mourning to take place as the lost past is reencountered resulting in empathic unsettlement. While looking for a possibly deceased Windust in DeepArcher, Maxine finds Vip Epperdew surviving his lovers' elopement as a professional player. The passage serves as proleptic parallel and frame for her later encounter with Windust, distilling contained emotion and true feeling in Maxine's process of mourning his loss.

In this passage, Maxine runs into Vip's avatar significantly standing "up on a ridgeline gazing at the desert" (2014: 405). Instead of using any usual greeting formula, she directly asks him about Bruno and Shae, as if taking for granted that Vip is searching the desert for the same purpose as herself, that is, looking for the departed ones. In narrative terms, Vip's character becomes functional only in relation to Bruno and Shae, within the frame of the thematic development of the complexity of human relations in their sexual and emotional dimensions. The emotional detachment and sexual and financial compulsive fetishism that seemed to condemn their relationship as a sick one in chapter 16, is here replaced by a genuine mourning of their loss devoid of the sexual and financial component. Vip's answer, "[w]e seem to be no longer a threesome" (2014: 405), voices the process of coming to terms with the loss of a unity almost gaining spiritual dimension as the sexual trio of Vip, Bruno and Shae embodies the trinity of a "threesome we."

The loneliness of the "deserted" Epperdew takes the form of a terrible freedom where previous social fears and constraints lose significance as he is struck by the the actual nature of his attachment to Bruno and Shae: "I always imagined if they ever did run out, I'd be left in some embarrassing situation, handcuffed to a lamppost or whatever. But there I was, as free as any normal citizen" (2014: 405). The clean, natural void of the desert emphasizes the loneliness of loss, but also stands in ethical and aesthetic contrast with the pervading dirt of the basement episode; the scene transforms Vip's deviant sexuality in

chapter 26 into a pure—if not virtuous—feeling in chapter 36 that still echoes Humbert Humbert's love for grown-up Lolita in Nabokov's novel. The nostalgic lament of this second Vip passage provides the kind of revelation that can only take place after crossing the Styx, and endows the first with the signification sought in the compulsive repetition of a sick sexual signifier. In terms of traumatic textuality, there is a movement from affective dissociation to empathic engagement, from compulsive repetition of the past-as-present to the present acknowledgement of the lost past, from fetishization to feeling and a blurring of the borders between victim and monster.

At the aesthetic level, the typically detached light tone of postmodernism develops into the elegiac tone that now mourns for loss with full lyricism. This adds to, and helps to overcome the compulsive pastiche, the endlessly deferring mirroring reflections, the obsessive experimentalism with a form in search of meaning and endows metafiction with a self-reflective role in working through trauma.

With the Vip passages, Pynchon engages in an aesthetic dialogue with Nabokov's *Lolita* that does not end in suicide, but works its loss through aesthetic unsettlement; an engagement with and self-conscious critical distance from previous aesthetic paradigms. The difference in age, the contrast between apparent perversion and true love, the play with the readers' sexual prejudices, the role reversal in power relations, or the confusion between victimage and monstrosity are elements constructing the Vip plot in nostalgic relation with Nabokov's *Lolita*. A retrospective reading of the first passage links the suburban basement with Quilty's DukDuk ranch; and Bruno and Shae's vulgar, lascivious innocence with Lolita's; while pedophilic incest is suggested in the second passage when Vip "understood the kids weren't coming back" (2014: 405).

In terms of aesthetic development, the postmillennial Pynchon seems to be enacting some kind of reconciliation with a master text that is technically postmodern while retaining the existential anguish that postmodernity has been fighting to do without in the second half of the 20th century. As personal historiography, this movement might be interpreted as the elegiac song of Pynchon's (personal and artistic) lost youth; a mourning ritual that allows his narrative to work through the present, postmodern loss after 9/11.

The climax anticipated by the lament of this post-9/11 Vip passage is echoed by its immediate juxtaposition to a passage in which Windust's avatar greets Maxine to say his last good-bye in the hyperreal world of DeepArcher. The "Deep" adjective in the name of the program evokes both the epic *katabasis*[6] and the virtual experience of repressed, unconscious memory[7] into what might be described as a virtual allegory of psychoanalytic epics. The arrow of the "Archer" suggests the typically Pynchonian fatality of the time vector both leading to unavoidable death and in contrast with the desire to reverse its direction, travel back in time, perhaps stop it, bring the departed ones back to life, if only by indulging in memories. All these ingredients are typically elegiac within the frame of epics, but gain lyrical intensity when poetic emotion is expressed from the private perspective of women (mothers, lovers) deserted as a result of the hero's death.[8]

During their virtual encounter inside the videogame, Windust's avatar still refuses to adjust to Maxine's romantic fantasy with Omar

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[6] Collado-Rodríguez notes the symbolic meaning of DeepArcher as a virtual space of mourning where we "cope with the effects of our mortality" (2016: 236).

[7] Cowart also finds an analogical relation between the Internet and the human mind in *Bleeding Edge*, where the surface Web would correspond with consciousness while "the Deep Web models the unconscious." However, and despite the fact that he even finds intertextual relation with Eliot's *The Waste Land*, he elaborates on the implications in the Derridean relation between void and *Verbum* and misses—though by very little—the lament in the reversed verticality of the Twin Towers as well as the numinous relevance of DeepArcher as the Hades of classical epics and Dante's *Inferno*.

[8] By character and literary convention, the female perspective allows for higher intensity of emotion, while the death of the hero, seen from the female perspective adds public, historical pathos to the private one. Thus, the choice of a female protagonist in *Bleeding Edge* might well be determined by the possibility to voice intense emotion in indirect free style, conferring the lament a central, climactic role in developing its narrative epics. Within the complex motif network of Pynchon's narrative universe in general and its posthuman development in *Bleeding Edge*, Collado-Rodríguez interprets the choice of a female main character in this occasion as the embodiment of a "social force" against the social stagnation resulting from the binary thinking of commodified trauma in the virtual posthuman landscape (2016: 238).

Sharif. Instead, he would rather reduce the emotional significance of their encounter by focusing on the sexual and economic dimensions only. However (and precisely because they meet in DeepArcher), Maxine insists in seeing him under a somewhat romantic light, as "a younger version of himself, a not-yet-corrupted entry-level wise-ass, wiser than he deserves" (2014: 406). Inside Maxine's virtual projection of her repressed desires, Windust rejects her romantic fantasy of "lovers on the run" only after a "[l]ong silence, as if he's having an argument with himself" (2014: 407), suggesting he sacrificially rejects her love because he is too bad for her, or out of the sheer impossibility of being *deeparched*, a euphemism that anticipates the revelation of his death in chapter 37.

Although Maxine's affair with Windust can be interpreted as a form of acting out a female fantasy that compensates the romantic loss of her failed marriage, her sincere lament for Windust's loss is emotionally engaged in the present after 9/11. Amidst the Christmas celebrations that conveniently serve to intensify anticipatory mourning for Windust, Maxine calls his first, shortened name: "at a typically uneasy distance from the jollification, Nick Windust" (2014: 402). The silence she gets for an answer echoes the vast emptiness of the desert in the second Vip passage, implying loss: "'Nick.' He is silent, wherever he is" (2014: 402).

In chapter 37, Maxine rescues Windust's corpse from a herd of wild dogs that are feeding on it on the floor of the same apartment where they had sex before 9/11. Her shocked reaction at the sudden discovery of his violent death reveals the intensity of her emotions, which make her sick enough to vomit, hurt enough to wish it was all a bad dream. At the end of the chapter, as she tells her father about it, the lament for his death concentrates on the pain of his loss: "Out it comes, the unrelenting vacuum of Windust's departure" (2014: 421).

In the following chapter, Maxine's return to DeepArcher in search for Windust expresses her hopeless wish to bring him back to life through remembrance, endowing the program with symbolic relevance as the site of mourning: "there's nobody but herself to ask what she's down there looking for, because the answer is so pathetically obvious. Yes, she's aware DeepArcher doesn't do resurrections" (2014: 426).

Finally, at the end of chapter 39, where the deeds of dead-hero Windust are recalled by his widows (Maxine and Xiomara, 447), Maxine

seems to be able to work through his death. After "trying to summon back [. . .] his spirit" by "snort[ing] the last vestiges of his punk-rock cologne" (2014: 447), she goes to bed bidding him "good night. Good night, Nick" (2014: 447).

Still, all this emotion cannot be only attributed to Maxine's sensibility as a character. Empathic unsettlement also takes place at the narrative level, or at least beyond Maxine's psychological limitations as character. Since the 9/11 attacks, Windust's apparent monstrous war-criminal insensibility is questioned by letting readers have brief glimpses at his feelings, which allows them to reassess his apparent insensibility as heroic emotional containment. In chapter 29, while Maxine is only concerned with her family's wellbeing, Windust calls her to check she is alive: "THE PHONE RINGS. 'Are you all right" (2014: 318). But he is so far from her concerns that she does not even recognize his voice, which by contrast, intensifies Windust's feelings for her. As if to offer consolation, he goes on to say: "You want to talk, you've got my number" (2014: 318). However, Maxine's failure to acknowledge Windust's feelings for her only raises the reader's suspicions that such feelings might be genuine.

In chapter 35, in the midst of a conversation dealing with merely practical issues (returning the money Maxine lent him to escape), and after she recriminates him for concealing their relationship, Windust responds by imagining an alternative reality full of emotional containment, in which he did not have to leave. In this reality, he simply contemplates how beautiful she is in his mind: "'Thanks, angel' [. . .] He's examining her face. 'Earrings. Simple diamond studs. With your hair up…'" (2014: 391). But his imagined reality is impossible for him not only because he is "a man on the edge" (2014: 390) who accepts his heroic fateful destiny—for which "'[r]etirement' is a euphemism" (2014: 379). This reality is impossible for him because it involves Maxine's romantic fantasy of being "lovers in the run" (2014: 407); a fantasy Windust would not let her trade for the safety of her reality: "'Oh, great call. Your kids, your home, your family, your business and reputation, in exchange for a cheap fatality'" (2014: 407).

As the obscenity of sexual and financial violence in chapter 24 is resolved into a post 9/11 elegiac mourning for the departed that makes no distinctions between victims and perpetrators through chapters 30-40, DeepArcher functions as the site for ritual mourning that facilitates

working through traumatic memories into a present with "no storyline, no details about the destination, no manual to read, no cheat list" (2014: 403) so the player is left with full ethical responsibility of freewill in the game.

The superposition of Windust's villainous and heroic character allows Pynchon to bridge a connection between the private and public aspects of literary historiography as it responds to trauma, since the hero is the individual instrument that the (financial, political) "gods" *ab-use* in the construction of the (hi)stories of a people. In chapter 29, during the first night right after the 9/11 attacks, Maxine has a dream that brings readers back to the intertextual reference to Spiegelman's *Maus* in chapter 24. In Maxine's Jewish dream, the Twin-Towers attacks seem to compulsively repeat or intertextually *act out* Spiegelman's surrogate representation of the Holocaust:

> Sometime during the night, Maxine dreams she's a mouse who's been running at large inside the walls of a vast apartment building she understands is the U.S. [. . .] she has been attracted by what she recognizes as a sort of humane mousetrap [. . .] a multilevel event space of some kind, at a gathering, maybe a party, full of unfamiliar faces, fellow mice, but no longer exactly, or only, mice [. . .] and this can only be analogous to death. (2014: 318-19)

As the evocation of partying and verticality provide an interpretive key for chapter 28, a link is also made that allows interpreting the 9/11 attacks as a historically compulsive repetition (acting out) of the Holocaust.[9]

However, in the post 9/11 chapters, the public dimension of Maxine's private lament for Windust is similarly revealed by her father at the end of chapter 37, when the conversation about Windust's loss is projected onto a wider historical frame that goes from the Indian massacres to the Holocaust (2014: 421-22). Even Windust himself

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[9] The thematization of prolepsis in Pynchon's work is also used by Robson to connect the opening paragraph of *Gravity's Rainbow* ("A screaming comes across the sky. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare to it now") and *Bleeding Edge* in a historical and narrative continuum that links WWII and 9/11: "Fast-forward more than half a century—from 1944 to 2001" (Dotcom Survivors 2013, 56).

realizes that her redemptive proposal of romantic elopement conceals her lament for "all those you can't save" (2014: 407).[10]

It is in the public sphere where *Bleeding Edge* becomes most overtly elegiac, through unmistakable intertextual references to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. The interpretive key appears at the beginning of chapter 39, where Maxine sees the succession of lighted panels in a passing train as Tarot cards that, like the ones in Eliot's poem, only make sense within the context of the novel: "The Scholar" pointing at revelation, "The Unhoused" suggesting the souls of the departed ones, "The Warrior Thief" in clear reference to Windust, "The Haunted Woman" (2014: 439) as Maxine herself, and finally "The Unwelcome Messenger" (2014: 440) from hell,[11] who is Windust's ex-wife Xiomara. Xiomara will partly reconcile Maxine with Windust's memory by revealing that he might have left her for the same reason he left Xiomara; that he accepted his destiny as a hero-soldier. But Xiomara is mostly unwelcome because she forces Maxine to work through the traumatic events of the attacks by walking to Ground Zero: "'Do you mind if we walk back across the bridge, over to Ground Zero?' [. . .] 'You've never been there?' 'Not since it happened. Made a point of avoiding it, in fact'" (2014: 445).

As they watch the Brooklyn Bridge from Fulton Landing, the narrator provides his version of lines 62-65 from "The Burial of the Dead"[12]: "the legion of traumatized souls coming across the bridge, dust-

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[10] Cowart notices this "[h]istorical prolepsis" in *Bleeding Edge* and interprets this "iteration, duplication, or recapitulation" as "an amplification of the original suffering." While I agree that there is an undeniable amplificatory effect in historical iteration, I would rather argue that amplification builds into non-surrogate, present and future traumatic experience of 9/11. Also, he claims for the healing potential of the novel in terms of traumatic experience that go beyond LaCapra's more cautious concept of empathic unsettlement, by indulging in a critical interpretation that rather suggests *acting out* historiographic and literary representations in the novel as redemptive narrative.

[11] After Maxine meets Xiomara, she leads her through a long pedestrian tunnel that, to Maxine, evokes the entrance to the underworld of Hell through intertextual connection with the Third Canto of Dante's *Inferno*: "ALL HOPE ABANDON" (2014: 440).

[12] "A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,/I had not thought death had undone so many./Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,/And each man fixed his eyes before his feet." Lines 62-63 almost literally translate Dante's:

covered, smelling like demolition and smoke and death, vacant-eyed, in flight, in shock" (2014: 445). The passage immediately connects back with the end of chapter 28, where similar "crowds drifting slowly out into the little legendary streets" (2014: 312) may include the Petronian Cumaean Sybil of the *Satyricon* in Eliot's epigraph, whose face "claimed by the time [. . .] can see ahead" (2014: 312) the disasters to come. By virtue of dramatic irony, the obvious answer to this rhetorical question is no other than the "hypocritelecteur!" of "The Burial of the Dead" who, in line 76, is identified with the aged poet as his brother. These crowds of "zombies" who are "still walking around stunned" (2014: 321) will appear again in chapter 29, as they take their children to school after the attacks. In chapter 31, Maxine's guru acknowledges he is "seeing people in the street who are supposed to be dead" and rhetorically wondering "[i]s it just this miserable city, too many faces making us crazy? Are we seeing some wholesale return of the dead?" (2014: 339).

The use of dramatic irony in chapter 28 can also be read against the beginning of "The Waste Land," where the cruelty of April is intensified by the memories of a happier past.[13] Similarly, amongst the faces of the living dead that cross the bridges in both texts, the lyrical voice requires mirroring recognition from the departed. As Maxine meets Vip Epperdew in DeepArcher, "[s]he is not sure he recognizes her" and would not depart from him before asking "do you remember me?" (2014: 405), which of course, he does not. The poet in "The Burial of the Dead" recognizes his fellow-soldier Stetson as "one I knew," yet gets no answer

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"silungatratta/di gente, ch'io non avrei mai creduto/che morte tantan'avesse disfatta" (Inferno, III: 55-7), providing Eliot's and Pynchon's passages with an interpretive key through intertextual reference that brings both bridges down to the underworld of the dead.

[13] Cowart remarks how spring brackets the story at the beginning and the end, while the novel places little emphasis on "the day's actual violence." In intertextual dialogue with Eliot's "The Waste Land," the function of spring (April, in Eliot's poem) is most obviously elegiac; by allowing to mourn over lost happiness (spring 2001) and lament for the loss of the departed ones (spring 2002). Still, Collado-Rodríguez suggests that the spring at the end of *Bleeding Edge* "invokes the necessity to bring back the affects that may dispel commodified trauma" and "announces the beginning of another cycle of life" (2016: 240) after trauma has been worked through.

to his rhetorical question. The memories of the departed ones return more physically with the image of their corpses in obscene contrast with their emotional dissociation. The poetic voice in "The Burial of the Dead" imagines "the Dog [. . .] dig[ging] up [. . .] again" (74-5) "[t]hat corpse you planted last year in your garden" (71). In chapter 37, both dog and Stetson merge in Windust's apartment when Maxine[14] addresses the alpha dog that is feeding on Windust's corpse: "Don't I remember you from Westminster last year, Best in Category?" (2014: 409).

In both texts, the numinous dimension of the dog as keeper of the doors to hell is suggestive of the pagan and Christian *katabasis*. While Eliot uses intertextual connections with Dante's *Inferno* in "What the Thunder Said" (412-13, 428), he also draws on a long literary tradition that endows the image of the tower with a symbolic significance as human *hubris* and its fall with the fall of civilization: "Le Prince d'Aquitaine a la tour abolie" (430) as well as prison (412-15). Within the context of post-WWI Europe and the advantage of historical perspective, the economic symbolism of the towers in "The Waste Land" cannot be missed.

The inverted verticality of the gathering celebrating the millennial dotcom bubble in chapter 28 joins the double symbolism of Eliot's ruined tower as spiritual prison and the crumbling down of Western civilization. Both symbolisms become awkwardly literalized in the attack to the Twin Towers as they endow the experience of being trapped in the infernal verticality of the towers with the ethical dimension of financial consequence as the buildings and the system simultaneously collapse.[15] After 9/11, Heidi explains to Maxine that, "[e]verything has to be literal

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[14] The intertextual dialogue between Eliot's and Pynchon's texts suggests Isolde's mourning for Tristan in the also anticipatory lines: "Frisch weht der *Wind* (my italics)/ Der Heimatzu/ Mein Irisch Kind/ Woweilest du?" (31-34) to be read against Maxine's mourning for Windust, in his–though troublesomely redeemed—heroic dimension.
[15] Cowart refers to this literalized symbolism as "visual paronomasia" but he does not get out of the textual sphere into the actual symbolism and flattening of the physical Towers themselves, which is precisely what effects literalization by fully linking the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of the novel.

now", because it is "as if somehow irony [. . .] actually brought on the events of 11 September" (2014: 335).[16]

This "somehow" puzzles the reader into what seems to be a relation of causality between text and reality, an identification between both that not only might explain how and why the attacks took place, but also, as both Eliot and LaCapra seem to imply, the means to work through traumatic loss into a more ethically responsible present and future. When Maxine asks Xiomara about Windust's possible redemption after death, Xiomara pictures him in the "parallel world" (2014: 443) of the underground city of "Xibalba, reunited with his evil twin" (2014: 446), who "was doing the things he was pretending not to up here" (2014: 443). As Windust accepts both his destiny and his guilt for the atrocities he committed in Guatemala in the 1980s, it becomes more difficult to distinguish the victim from the perpetrator in him, whom Xiomara remembers as "an entry-level kid who didn't know how much trouble his soul was in" (2014: 442).

By resolving the novel into a non-redemptive narrative that prevents full identification with either victims or perpetrators, *Bleeding Edge* becomes the site for ritualized mourning that allows both reader and text to work through historical traumatic loss by means of empathic unsettlement. But the literary devices used in this novel also allow for an aesthetic unsettlement that may suggest the Postmodernist working

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[16] *By considering the motif of verticality in *Bleeding Edge* only at the level of conspiracy, Huehls detects a certain resistance against flattening (literalization) in the novel. However, a rhetorical interpretation of flattened verticality might still confer ethical responsiblity to *mimesis*. The ethical dimension of mimesis is suggested by an intertextual construction of elegy that somehow precedes history, as if aesthetic representations of historical events could be somehow held accountable for their subsequent historical repetitions. While Huehls' concern for flattened conspiracy is resolved by redemptive love, flattened rhetorical language acknowledges that literature (as a form of historiography) is performatively entangled with history. Aesthetic disengagement with the ethical responsibilities of art corresponds also with ethical disengagement with its aesthetic responsibilities as forms of compulsively repeating or *acting out* historical and literary traumas. Therefore, there is a quality in former literary forms that is to be critically and creatively imitated by subsequent works, as well as there is an ethical responsibility in compulsively repeating historical loss.

through the loss of an interpretive whole systematically denied to Pynchon's readers in previous novels.

In light of Eliot's poem, the desert in DeepArcher may be an allegorical representation of post-9/11 New York as a paradigm of western civilization—the virtual, "Unreal city" in line 60, that is also the site of poetry as the sung memory of individual and collective experience of trauma. And just as "The Waste Land" ends with the hopeful advice of an ethical code for the reconstruction of Europe,[17] DeepArcher is imagined as "a sacred city all in pixels waiting to be reassembled, as if disasters could be run in reverse, the towers rise out of black ruin, the bits and pieces and lives, no matter how finely vaporized, become whole again" (2014: 446). But the allegorical dimension of DeepArcher also involves the aesthetic reconstruction of postmodernism from the bits and pieces that act out deconstructed forms, disconnected, compulsive pastiche, metafictional alienation from suspended disbelief, victimized loss of authorial voice under monstrous metanarrative perpetration, and anxiety of influence. This allegory works through postmodernism by producing an effect of aesthetic unsettlement that makes it possible to incorporate the literary tradition into the creative process as well as a sense of aesthetic responsibility that may allow postmodernity to come to terms with its present and future project.[18]

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[17] "Datta.Dayadhvam.Damyata./Shantih, shantih, shantih," from the Upanishads ("Give, show compassion, and control yourself/The peace which passeth all understanding").

[18] Robson notices the pun on the metaphor in the title of the novel, "[a] bleeding edge is also an edge that has lost its sharpness" (2013: 56), but in making New York the Real term in the comparison, he misses a possible aesthetic dimension implying a current loss of sharpness in postmodernity. A similar claim is made by Cowart when he interprets *Bleeding Edge* as the artistic site where Pynchon "takes up a position at the bleeding edge of the art that defines his moment in literary history," but he relates this position with a form of "epistemic perception" that resists "the infantilization of public discourse." I would like to bring what Cowart calls "infantilized public discourse" within the reach of LaCapra's instrumental frame as the "redemptive literature" typical of posttraumatic acting out, while Pynchon's artistic choice stands undecidedly open by working through into aesthetic unsettlement.

The lament suggestively anticipated in the novel before 9/11 and more extensively developed in the succeeding chapters, places *Bleeding Edge* within a wider, inter and extratextual frame of some US epics where the aesthetic dimension has an ethical role in reconstructing the bits and pieces of national history and identity as well as literary tradition. The postmodern *vates* in *Bleeding Edge* wonders whether the postmodernist ironic detachment of pre-9/11 literary forms might have contributed to this fatal outcome by not taking any ethical and aesthetic responsibility in constructing some national literary frame that might have created a different type of collective consciousness; a collective consciousness that might have prevented the collapse of Western civilization in the literal and literary symbolism of the Twin Towers. Depicted as perpetrator of its own destruction, postmodernist aesthetics in this novel works through the crumbling down of its selfish, narcissistic towers that Eliot pictures like a prison (414-15); an aesthetic prison. The result is a non-redemptive aesthetics effecting some aesthetic unsettlement and involving a self-critical perspective that reconstructs, rather than deconstructs a present literary tradition from the fragments Pynchon has shored against his ruins.

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