CHAPTER 3

Displaced Choruses
Thomas Pynchon's Surplus Populations

Tragedy is traditionally thought of in terms of a singular hero whose "hamartia," that fault or error frequently understood as a fatal flaw, generates the action of the drama. So far, we have been presented with novels wherein tragic form articulates an individual's reversal of fortune within the context of postwar America, at a time when the possibilities for social mobility through work had succumbed to the law of diminishing returns. While the coordinates of tragic action are therefore individuated, we have also seen how suffering radiates outward from the central character, very often implicating a multitude of others who become entangled in the overall narrative drive toward death. And yet, with Gaddis and Plath at least, these minor characters are not elevated to the heights of tragic figuration precisely because they are in a sense already fallen within the racialized class hierarchies of the labor market. In the postwar novel, the social forms of classical tragedy, often dividing between the court and the commoner, are frequently remediated via race; the aspiration for social mobility via the labor market as well as its tragic undoing are, consequently, experienced through predominately white working- and middle-class protagonists.

In this chapter, I want to interrogate the relationship between an individual's sacrificial dismemberment and a multitude whose suffering is presented as a kind of collateral damage to be pushed offstage and out of sight. While Tyrone Slothrop, the central protagonist of Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, is in one sense elevated above a large unnominated collective of minor characters, precisely because of him being a kind of singular sacrificial scapegoat, he is also a part of the collectively fallen humanity that Pynchon names "the preterite." While this character dynamic potentially occludes the racialization of class hierarchies, with a white man standing in for a more heterogenous population, this sacrificial relationship between the one and the many also recalls a version of tragedy from the moment of its inception in ancient slave society. The etymology

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of "tragedy" is said to originate from the Greek "tragus" (he-goat) and ode, translating literally as "goat song," a lyric sung to mark the slaying of an animal.[1] Indeed, one of the traits that distinguishes Greek tragedy from all of tragedy's other forms is its mimetic relation to the premodern ritual of sacrifice; since ancient times, sacrifice has been thought of as a symbolic act, the substitution of a totem of favor before the gods, and Greek tragedy is unique insofar as it incorporates traces of the symbolic art of sacrifice within the central dramatic act.[2] The logic of sacrifice, like the structure of Attic tragedy, also rests on the notion of the multiple. Freud makes this argument in the first pages of *Totem and Taboo*: "the character of a totem," he claims, "is inherent not only in a single animal or single being but in all the members of the species."[3] Tragedy, too, and particularly ancient tragedy, incorporates into its form this dialectical arrangement between a singular sacrifice and a group that bears witness to this event. The proper name for this collective being is the chorus, a multitudinous form that pushes tragedy beyond the parameters of individuated suffering and toward something more radically inassimilable. "The foreign, the collective, the ecstatic, the enslaved," writes Page duBois, "are always there, from tragedy's beginnings, disrupting efforts to isolate the solitary, masterly self attempting to heroically grapple with fate."[4] DuBois' articulation here of a racially disenfranchised group will be seen to articulate as the "preterite" of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Preterition, a term Pynchon borrows from Calvinism, describes that fallen part of humanity allegedly passed over by God. This chapter will read the formal instantiation of preterition in terms that harken back to the choric structure of Greek tragedy while simultaneously updating that ancient form to meet the ideological matrix of a specifically racial capitalism.

That an individual's death might be multiplied across a vast character network recalls two genres that hypothetically serve as bookends to tragedy's literary genealogy. Tragedy is born alongside (or even within) Homer's epic, *The Iliad*; and, at the other end of its life cycle, the so-called demise of tragedy is said to parallel the rise of the novel from the eighteenth century.[5] The idea that an individual's death can somehow signify the depredations of many more is integral to the way tragedy transposes itself off the stage and into the dialogic world of novelistic realism. While it has been argued that the novel's propensity toward multiplicity is what makes it formally incompatible with anything like dramatic tragedy, here I want to suggest that the genetic makeup of tragedy has included this kind of multiplicity right from the beginning. If the epic is to be thought of, in Franco Moretti's terms, as "a totality that

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is 'living' and inseparable from individuality,"[6] novelized tragedy might therefore be apprehended as the inversion of this logic: the suffering of an individual who is inseparable from a living totality.

The relationship between the one and the many, or the personal and the general, has continued to energize the critical reception of both tragedy and the novel in modern times. Raymond Williams' thesis on modern tragedy, as we have already seen, rests on the revolutionary impulse of the many: "what the form then embodies," for Williams, "is not an isolable metaphysical stance, rooted in individual experience, but a shared and indeed collective experience."[7] And although Richard Halpern is wary of tragedy's absorption into the formal multiplicity of the novel, he nevertheless concludes that novelistic "rabble" constitutes the tragedy of commercial society. "As an unassailable remainder," he writes, "it gives the lie to modern society's promise to provide a meaningful ethical and political community for all its members."[8] Here, the politico-economic implications of representing the multitude as a kind of "unassailable remainder" can be felt in the migratory shifts of living labor and, in particular, those pushed outside the formal economy. If the rise of immaterial labor occurs simultaneously with the offshoring of traditional forms of manufacture and production, which dominated the economy in the nineteenth century and earlier half of the twentieth century, that rise also leads to what Harry Braverman describes as an "immense increase in the industrial reserve army."[9] This tendency, writes Braverman, "is but one of the factors leading to what Marx called an 'accumulation of misery, corresponding to the accumulation of capital.'"[10] While the preceding chapters on Gaddis and Plath have foregrounded various types of precarious and de-industrial work, both waged and unwaged, in this chapter I want to shift attention to work's absolute negative referent: unemployment. While we have seen in the previous chapters that secure employment and its promise of social mobility – predicated on a strong state safety net, high wages, and organized labor – was already in the process of being withdrawn for a great majority of Americans, the 1950s and 1960s were nonetheless characterized by general levels of economic growth. Indeed the "boom" of the immediate postwar decades provides the structural conditions for the aspirations shared by many of the characters in the novels, all of whom occupy "the brief American century," as Fredric Jameson has described the period from 1945 to 1973.[11] The 1970s, then, contained not only a general reversal of fortune, as characterized by decline in economic growth in the United States, but also a shift from a distinctly American capitalism toward a globally integrated and finance-driven capitalism. The early

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1970s also mark the emergence of what Robert Brenner describes as "the long economic downturn," a general and more systemic period of stagflation that persists into the present. It is within this context, beginning in 1973, that real wages have fallen to "one-third to one-half of those for the years 1950–73, while the average unemployment rate has been more than double."[12] In this context, both the disorganized rabble surging through the narrative of Pynchon's modern epic and the sacrifice of the aimlessly wandering Slothrop articulate something particular about the vast surplus populations of displaced industrial labor, of under- and unemployed workers, that grew exponentially as the twentieth century accelerated into a period of de-industrialization.

The vast character-system of *Gravity's Rainbow* is beset by social hierarchies in ways that register the intensification of economic insecurity and an atmospheric fear that characterized these years of economic crisis. Similar to descriptions of New York in Gaddis' and Plath's novels, the environments of *Gravity's Rainbow* are invested with a feeling of decay and decline. In so many passages, war-torn Mitteleuropa is described as a post-industrial waste-scape: "all the objects have grown still, drowned, enfeebled with evening, terminal evening. Tough skins of oxides, some only a molecule thick, shroud the metal surfaces, fade out human reflection" (361). As Joanna and Robert Brenner write in an article published in the aftermath of Ronald Reagan's election as president in 1980, "the period since the late '60's has witnessed a severe economic crisis," the symptoms of which are profoundly social: "Real wages, especially for the unorganized majority, have been cut; speed-up, lack of safety and other declining conditions have become a fact of life at work. In addition, the quality of life: of social services, of the cities, of the natural environment has decayed."[13] While *Gravity's Rainbow* is the conglomerate of multiple styles and genres, I want to suggest that its prose persistently channels this sense of post-industrial decay when shifting away from something comic and into a poetics of loss and especially so when narratively tethered to its most precarious characters, the surplus populations of the postwar world.

Post-A4 Humanity

The monumental breadth of *Gravity*'s *Rainbow* undertakes the task of representing the mass production of bare life and its collective suffering within a narrative that encompasses multiple specters of the past, ancient and modern, mythic and historic, as well as figures taken from literary tradition, Teutonic mythology, genealogies of plastics and Pavlovian

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psychology, and transnational histories of colonialism and imperialism, all of which is narrated through a mixture of genres and styles. Speaking to the reach of *Gravity's Rainbow*, Edward Mendelson has written of the specifically "international" mode of Pynchon's encyclopedism: "his attention to cartels and communications-networks that ignore national boundaries, suggest that he may be the encyclopedist of that newly-forming international culture whose character his book explicitly labors to identify."[14] The truly epic comportment of *Gravity's Rainbow* is as much an achievement of breadth of material as it is of style. Pynchon matches the seething multiplicity of the book with a stylistic dexterity reminiscent of James Joyce, Pynchon's greatest forefather in terms of totalizing impulse. Thus Tony Tanner writes in an early study of Pynchon's work: "Pynchon has created a book that is both one of the great historical novels of our time and arguably the most important literary text since *Ulysses*."[15] The narrative tells the story of Tyrone Slothrop's sacrifice against the historical background of World War II, and his death is tragic precisely because of its articulation within a mythic system that conjoins his fate to the fate of thousands more. Here, Pynchon's "internationalism" is not only concerned with "cartels" and "communication networks," as Mendelson puts it, but with the international movement of laboring bodies across distinct geopolitical and geographic zones. Braverman, writing in 1974, frames this internationalism specifically in terms of a reserve army of bodies: "labor has to some extent become internationalized," so that the United States now draws "upon a labor reservoir which extends in a broad band from India and Pakistan in the east across northern Africa and southernmost Europe all the way to the Caribbean and other portions of Latin American in the west." In Braverman's account, these populations are subject to the "lowest paid labor" and "high rates of unemployment."[16] Braverman reemphasizes the racialized composition of this precariat, where the lowest rung of the labor reservoir "is occupied by Puerto Rican, Mexican, and other Latin American Workers, who have been added to the pool of lowest-paid labor which is made up chiefly of black workers."[17]

Unlike Gaddis and Plath, whose emphases on affective labor are situated in historical contexts roughly contemporaneous with the writing of their novels, Pynchon's novel describes a historical moment at a greater remove from that in which the novel is written; but, nevertheless, the echoes of that moment are still felt powerfully within the novel's distinct historical situation. In other words, the Cold War is the context the book inhabits and World War II is the historical content that inhabits the book. Shawn Smith has offered one account for the tessellation of these two historical

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settings: "Clearly, *GR* is its *narrator's* attempt to draw parallels, and establish a line of continuity between World War II and the Vietnam War."[18] This continuity – between wars – is also, and even primarily, mediated by the movement of capital and labor in the period, and in particular the world-historic shift from industrialism to what we now recognize as finance-driven late capitalism. World War II was the last great industrial war of the twentieth century insofar as it was the end of the kind of total, broadly symmetrical war that called forth an entire country's resources, not least in the mass production and manufacture of weaponry.[19] Linking the "immense upward surge in the accumulation of capital" of World War II to rising levels of unemployment in the 1970s, Braverman writes that "the scope and energy of the accumulation process that began at the start of the 1940s has completed the annihilation of the agriculture population in the United States and largely transformed it, black and white alike, into an urban 'labor force,' and this has been supplemented by the import of workers on a considerable scale from Latin America."[20] Significantly, for Braverman, these economic forces generated the economic circumstances for the "immense increase in the industrial reserve army" and the doubling of the number of "officially counted unemployed, so that in the early 1970s this part of the working class had mounted into the 4 to 5 million."[21] While the military-industrial complex describes the US economy's fixation on the products of war, so much of the work undertaken in the name of the V2 rocket in *Gravity's Rainbow* comprises de-industrial contexts. Slothrop is an employee of the intelligence agency ACHTUNG, and much of the espionage is concerned with the immaterial or at least nonproductive or informational labors of war (psychology, bureaucracy, intelligence). In this regard, World War II feels very much mediated by the Cold War context in which Pynchon was writing: more John le Carré than Thomas Keneally.

The widespread paranoia that infected American society during the Cold War and of which Slothrop is an exemplary figure is due in part to the fact that technology had developed at such a speed during World War II that, by its end, war had morphed into a zero-sum game of apocalyptic proportions. With the introduction of the atomic bomb, capacities for mass destruction no longer needed to be waged by soldiers and mass-produced artillery on the battlefield but could instead be directed into singular sites from a remove and with the press of a button.[22] While this kind of technological warfare, and its attendant threat of mass destruction, is at the forefront of Pynchon's 1973 novel, the aftershocks of scientific and technological revolution play out in the novel's descriptions of labor. Glenda Carpio is right to emphasize

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that, during World War II, "many more people died manufacturing the V-2 rocket than were killed by it: an estimated 20,000 workers died, from exhaustion, starvation, physical and mental torture, and from summary executions."[23] In *Gravity's Rainbow* Pynchon takes this precise historical context, and yet registers something like a melancholic nostalgia for the displaced populations of immiserated factory workers of Mittelwerk where the A4 rocket was assembled by Nazi prisoners:

> Lakes of light, portages of darkness. The concrete facing tunnel has given way to whitewash over chunky fault-surfaces, phony-looking as the inside of an amusement-park cave. Entrances to cross-tunnels slip by like tuned pipes with an airflow at their mouths . . . once upon a time lathes did screech, playful machinists had shootouts with little brass squirt cans of cutting oil . . . knuckles were bloodied against grinding wheels, pores, creases and quicks were stabbed by the fine splitters of steel . . . tubeworks of alloy of glass contracted tinkling in the air that felt like the dead of winter, and amber light raced in phalanx among the small neon bulbs. Once, all this did happen. It is hard down here in Mittelwerke to live in the present for very long. The nostalgia you feel is not your own, but it's potent. All the objects have grown still, drowned, enfeebled with evening, terminal evening. Tough skins of oxides, some only a molecule thick, shroud the metal surfaces, fade out human reflection. Straw-colored drive belts of polyvinyl alcohol sag and release their last traces of industrial odor. (361)

The images of exhaustion and decay strung together in this description of the factory apply to the decomposing materials and metals of the industrial process as well as to the specter of a now absent and extinct workforce, the members of which were in the first instance marked out by a cultural and religious inheritance that was, in the fascist imagination, a form of racial belonging. The melancholy of the passage registers the out-of-joint feeling of these industrial workers long lost, and yet somehow the materials of their labor leak into the present tense of the syntax, like the specious general intellect. It is no wonder that, while *Gravity's Rainbow* takes its narrative context from World War II, its descriptions of Nazi labor camps and the products of warfare are haunted by a slightly belated but nonetheless connected moment: hordes of dispossessed and unemployed workers finding themselves out of work precisely because of the accumulation of technology and capital. This is the paradox, writes Braverman, glossing Marx's well-known law of capitalist accumulation: "the purpose of machinery is not to increase but to decrease the number of workers attached to it."[24] Writing from the historical vantage of industrial England in the latter half of the nineteenth century, Marx developed a theory for what might be thought of as that society's historical equivalent

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to today's vast hordes of transient workers that oscillate between the precarious positions of low-paid and casual work, and being discarded entirely from wage labor, dumped in the economic non-places of unemployment. Marx's name for this cast-off segment of the working population is the relative surplus population or reserve army of labor: "a relatively redundant population of workers, i.e., a population which is superfluous to capital's average requirements for its own valorization, and is therefore a surplus-population."[25] This surplus population is not just a collateral symptom of the capitalist economy. The accumulation of capital splits between the one and the many: the greater the accumulation of capital into a single individual, the capitalist, the more multitudes of workers are discarded. While Marx was not writing with historically specific foreknowledge of the post-industrial state, and while it would be historically inaccurate to map this industrial reserve army onto today's unemployed, there are some structural homologies worth teasing out. This is because a crucial aspect of immaterial labor is the anxiety and misery that expresses itself most powerfully during periods of unemployment. The material substrate of this misery, the destitution of finding oneself out of work, emphasizes capital's cannibalization of all aspects of life – even that time when we are not at work.

As if speaking directly to immaterial labor, Fredric Jameson, referring to Marx's "famous doctrine of immiseration," writes that the inverted logic of capitalist accumulation and unemployment, particularly in the United States, "was the object of much mockery during the affluent post-war 1950s and 1960s." And yet, he continues, it "is no longer a joking matter."

> Along with Marx's intimations of globalization, these analyses seem to renew the actuality today of *Capital* on a world scale. In another sense they designate a stage of "subsumption" in which the extra-economic or social no longer lies outside capital and economics but has been absorbed into it: so that being unemployed or without economic function is no longer to be expelled from capital but to remain within it. Where everything has been subsumed under capitalism, there is no longer anything outside it; and the unemployed – or here the destitute, the paupers – are as it were employed by capital to be unemployed; they fulfil an economic function by way of their very non-functioning (even if they are not paid to do so).[26]

This is the same logic of subsumption we encountered in the previous chapter when thinking about the domestic and reproductive labor of women: capitalism feeds off everything, including that which would appear to fall outside the formal economy. If, according to Jameson, the labor of Marx's surplus population comprises their unemployment, then it

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also comprises the affective comportment of this unemployment, the despair generated by financial disenfranchisement. Braverman formulates this as a surplus of affective misery: "It is not that the pressures of poverty, unemployment, and want have been eliminated – far from it – but rather that these have been supplemented by a discontent which cannot be touched by providing more prosperity and jobs because these are the very things that produced this discontent in the first place."[27] In terms of tragedy, if the chorus was traditionally inhabited by the politically and economically disenfranchised, then a similar structure prevails in *Gravity's Rainbow* where minor characters are synonymous with global capital's surplus precariat.

Populous Preterite

At the level of narrative, *Gravity's Rainbow* presents a vast character system that forms around a singular and sacrificial protagonist. The tragic structure of this narrative comprises the scapegoating of Tyrone Slothrop as symbolic substitute for the many immiserated lives of the novel, which are given further nomination as the book's "preterite." As if to amplify their deracinated status, the multitudes to which Slothrop's sacrifice corresponds are grouped together under the Calvinist term "preterition": the "many God passes over when he chooses the few" (658). But their loss is not just theological; they are, we are told, "the multitudes that are passed over by God and History" (357). This site of collective suffering, as with ancient tragedy, articulates as a dialectical relationship between a central hero and a chorus; and, as with the tragedies of the Athenian stage, Pynchon mobilizes the preterite as a collective vocalization of historical disenfranchisement.

Surplus populations of unnamed collectives surge though *Gravity's Rainbow* as a miscellany of bodies, appearing even before we are introduced to any one character, and certainly before Slothrop intrudes into the narrative space. "They," we read in the opening pages, "have begun to move. They pass in line, out of the main station, out of downtown, and begin pushing into older and more desolate parts of the city" (3). The pluralized pronoun will be used all throughout *Gravity's Rainbow* to designate the disposed rabble as well as the amorphous forces collected against them. The passage continues:

> Is this the way out? Faces turn to the windows, but no one dares ask, not out loud. Rain comes down. No, this is not a disentanglement from. But a progressive *knotting into* – they go in under archways, secret entrances of

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> rotted concrete that only looked like loops of an underpass . . . certain trestles of blackened wood have moved slowly by overhead, and the smells begun of coal from days far to the past, smells of naphtha winters, of Sundays when no traffic came through, of the coral-like and mysteriously vital growth, around the blind curves and out the lonely spurs, a sour-smell of rolling-stock absence, of maturing rust, developing through those empty days brilliant and deep, especially at dawn, with blue shadows to seal its passage, to try to bring events to Absolute Zero . . . and it is poorer the deeper they go . . . ruinous secret cities of poor, places whose *names he has never heard* . . . the walls break down, the roofs get fewer and so do the chances for light. (3)

As in the previous description of Mittelwerk, decay takes on a life of its own in the most material of terms, with "coral-like" growths and "maturing rust." But, again, there is also something immaterially spectral about this description – the smells emanate from coal, which has long since stopped being produced, and take on their own odor of melancholy: a "rolling-stock absence." It is hard to tell where the negativity or loss might be emanating from, whether it belongs to the amorphous group of bodies walking through this environment or to the place itself. Perhaps it is neither one nor the other, but, as the omniscient narration suggests, each is imbricated in the other: "a progressive knotting into." The centripetal force of this passage is countered by the open question, "is this the way out," which would also appear to support the centrifugal energy to which the syntax conforms: short sentences, which then spiral outward, connected only by a loose arrangement of ellipses. Although the description says these crowds are getting deeper into some center, the accumulative affect of the asyndeton seems to create its own density in space and time: a stasis produced in the layering of loss. This loss is palpable. They are not moving forward but circling repetitively in time, gravitating toward and yet only able to rotate around a dark center that lays in ruin: an "Absolute Zero."

This early introduction to the many of *Gravity's Rainbow* conjures the movement of a dispossessed people, the preterite. The fact that it does so within the context of World War II conjures the similarly theological term, Holocaust: the historical signifier for atrocities that occurred under Hitler, which has its roots in the Hebrew Bible and in particular the Genesis story of Isaac, translating as "whole burnt offering."[28] The question of the Holocaust in Pynchon's 1973 novel is notoriously fraught. Here, however, we can aver with Rob Turner that the term itself "functions like a linguistic blank," uttered only in description of "non-genocidal acts of burning," ultimately naming that which, by the narrative's end, "is still an absent

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space, and *still* immanent, glimpsed in some 'future' sky, casting an indelible stain upon the land."[29] This confluence of historical actuality and mythic sacrifice as suppressed from direct narrative treatment has important implications for the manner in which Slothrop vanishes from narrative space to be sacrificially scattered among the preterite. It also lends itself to the movement of foreign multitudes who populate the narrative background in "a great frontierless streaming," the cumulative effect of which requires lengthy quotation:

> Volksdeutsch from across the Oder, moved out by the Poles and headed for the camp at Rostock, Poles fleeing the Lublin regime, others going back home, the eyes of both parties, when they do meet, hooded behind cheekbones, eyes much older than what's forced them into moving, Estonians, Letts, and Lithuanians trekking north again, all their wintry wool in dark bundles, shoes in tatters, songs too hard to sing, talk pointless, Sudetens and East Prussians shuttling between Berlin and the DP camps in Mecklenburg, Czechs and Slovaks, Croats and Serbs, Tosks and Ghegs, Macedonians, Magyars, Vlachs, Circassians, Spaniols, Bulgars stirred and streaming over the surface of the Imperial cauldron, colliding, shearing alongside for miles, sliding away, numb, indifferent to all momenta but the deepest, the instability too far below their itchy feet to give a shape to, white wrists and ankles incredibly wasted poking from their striped prison-camp pyjamas, footsteps light as waterfowl's in this inland dust, caravans of Gypsies, axles or linchpins failing, horses dying, families leaving vehicles besides the roads for others to come live in a night, a day, over the white hot Autobahns, trains full of their own hanging off the cars that lumber overhead, squeezing aside for army convoys when they come through, White Russians sour with pain on the way west, Kazakh ex-P/Ws marching east, Wehrmacht veterans from other parts of old Germany, foreigners to Prussia as any Gypsies, carrying their old packs, wrapped in the army blankets they kept, pale green farmworker triangles sewn chest-high on each blouse bobbing, drifting, at a certain hour of the dusk, like candle-flames in religious procession – supposed to be heading today for Hannover, supposed to pick potatoes along the way, they've been chasing these nonexistent potato fields, and what for? (650–51)

The effect of this description is exhausting. Pynchon renders the "streaming" of people, racialized and ethnic groups, objects and places via a series of connected noun-phrases with no break or interruption as if the syntax itself is grinding toward a point of nonexistence. And yet it is also too short, all those bodies crammed into and condensed within a subordinate clause. Pynchon compresses the innumerable and infinite into a single, paratactic sentence. It conveys the treatment of humanity under late capitalism, flattened and amalgamated across a saturated surface: what

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Marx would call a system of equivalence.[30] It is as if the passage itself is doing the formal work of integration that genocide carries out on humans. This mess of unnamed bodies surges through the narrative in crowds with no particular order other than the leveling parataxis that flattens them into a one-dimensional plane. Molly Hite writes that "there is no bottom to this description of migrating people, their costumes, their habits, their salvaged possessions, and their techniques of survival," which is transmitted into style wherein the cataloguing of displaced individuals is mirrored in the metonymic and elliptical arrangement of the writing.[31] Steven Weisenburger similarly describes this collective as a historical by-product. "Evacuees, refugees, displaced persons, stateless persons and surviving concentration camp internees stream through the novel's episodes," he claims, "under the sign of the rocket."[32] As Weisenburger makes clear, preterition in the book is not a biblical category but a catalogue of bare life as it piles high in the twentieth century. This is the sacrificial surplus population not of any one single war but of racial capitalism – or what Ruth Wilson Gilmore has described as "a death-dealing displacement of difference into hierarchies that organize relations within and between the planet's sovereign political territories."[33]

Equivalence is an economic category that underscores the universal value and exchange of commodities. All throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*, preterition is not reducible to signifying holocaust but is constantly framed in terms of an economically determined multitude: "their unexplained need to keep some marginal population in these wan and preterite places, certainly for economic though, who knows, maybe emotional reasons too" (437). Here the pronominal "their" recalls what is elsewhere the capitalized "They," which in turn is described as "cosmic, its reach virtually unlimited, its most discernible components the huge corporations and cartels." This is the language of capital and industry in the time of total war: "These organizations, multi-national and therefore supra-national, ignore geographical and political boundaries; accountable to no one government, they circumvent the laws of all nations, and operate as states themselves" (519). Like the subordinate preterite, "They" are not reducible to the historically specific coordinates of German Nazism but are more readily associated with a global politico-economic articulation. If holocaust, either industrial or atomic, is the cause of paranoia, then this book is paranoid about the economic system contiguous with such an event.

While a surplus population is necessary to capitalist accumulation, these marginal populations act as a barometer for the concentration of private wealth. For Marx, surplus populations are made up of "generations of

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human beings stunted, short-lived, swiftly replacing each other, plucked, so to say, before maturity."[34] In *Gravity's Rainbow*, the preterite are everywhere, articulated as an accumulation of leftovers: as brands, labels, and bits and pieces of technology: "picking up rusted beer cans, rubbers yellow with preterite seed, Kleenex wadded to brain shapes hiding preterite snot, preterite tears, newspapers, broken glass, pieces of automobile, days when in superstition and fright he could *make it all fit*, seeing clearly in each an entry in a record, a history" (741). They are also the groups that amass outside factories, they are cargo bought and sold, and individually they are "doomed as dodoes" (867). This group of the rejected converge under the sign of the A4 rocket (its technical name is, appositely, the Aggregate-4, but it is more commonly referred to as the V2). We might also think of this rocket metonymically, as a stand-in for the bomb that marks the moment at which warfare enters a post-industrial age. The populations that converge under it should be thought of likewise: a "Post-A4 humanity is moving, hammering, and shouting among the tunnels," we are told, "unique to the zone" and who "answer to the new Uncertainty" (361). The new uncertainty of this post-rocket humanity is attendant on the changing organization of the labor market; cities that were once the prosperous hubs of manufacture are left desolate as factories are moved to cheaper sites of production.

The melancholy of historical hindsight pervades Pynchon's descriptions of a post-A4 humanity, inhabiting a world where "there is no History, no time-traveling capsule to find your way back to, only the lateness and the absence that fill a great railway shed after the capital has been evacuated" (361). These empty factories that were once the homes of all manner of exploitation and expropriation in the name of capital are now former homes to the industrial reserve armies, whose misery has intensified through another level of destitution. The expendable and redundant bodies of capital are now left aside as the wreckage of history:

> The white *Anubis*, gone on to salvation. Back here, in her wake, are the preterite, swimming and drowning, mired and afoot, poor passengers at sundown who've lost the way, blundering across one another's flotsam, the scrapings, the dreary junking of memories – all they have to hold to – churning, mixing, rising, falling. Men overboard and our common debris . . . (667)

This is the sort of biopolitics involved in Giorgio Agamben's bare life or *homo sacer* – a life that can be killed but not sacrificed – and it is this figure, the living dead, that is passed over by God and history.[35] Note the shift of preterite to its adjectival form, referring not to a singular and chosen group

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but to the multiple bodies thrown overboard. Pynchon's post-A4 humanity is a category of bare life, "Ghosts" who resemble something in between the living and the dead, "either likeness of the dead or wraiths of the living" (361).

Scapegoat, Fool

The precarious spaces inhabited by the preterite become fully realized in the central character, Slothrop, who sutures together the semes of the novel. He is an individual who weaves in and out of the preterite lives he encounters. Slothrop interacts with these minor characters and their attendant subplots as he searches for the V2 rocket and, while the path he traces often descends into chaos, his presence, as the named protagonist, gives this character system an implicit structure. The manner in which Slothrop's sacrifice is narrated, described as an "original scattering" that takes place "among the gray and preterite souls" (742), speaks to the inseparability between the one and the many in the novel. Even though Slothrop's hold on subjectivity is altogether precarious, the fact that his character dissolves into the surplus population grounds his place within the preterite. Slothrop's disappearance, his "scattering," speaks to the twofold precarity of his character: an exterior surface that acts as a palimpsest on which is inscribed the rise of misery involved in the performance of particular kinds of emotional labor here convergent with post-industrial shifts of working populations. In this way, too, the flimsiness and sheer superficiality of Slothrop's characterological makeup is symptomatic of a vanishing modernism pushed through postmodernity with all of its incumbent loss of interiority, subjectivity, and history, replaced by depthless facades.

Alex Woloch traces the proliferation of minor characters in the nineteenth-century novel back to the character systems of the ancient epic. Woloch writes that Homer's *Iliad* is "starkly divided between focusing its attention on a singular and central character and refracting the experience of war through multiple and intentionally varied characters."[36] While these "secondary characters make claims on the narrative," they are overwhelmed in the end by the narrative presence of the singular Achilles, "the central consciousness who conspicuously – but always incompletely – organizes the contours of the fictional structure as a whole."[37] The same cannot be said of Slothrop, the central consciousness of *Gravity's Rainbow*, because it is he who is overwhelmed by the secondary characters and not the other way around. Slothrop's specific relation to the suffering preterite is that he is, ultimately, one of them: "there's no telling which of the

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Zone's present-day population are offshoots of his original scattering" (383). That this kindred relation to the preterite is formally instantiated in Slothrop's sacrifice fulfills the tragic function of the narrative. If, as it is for Woloch, minor characters are the proletariat of the novel, set in dialectical opposition to the individual hero or protagonist who ultimately subsumes them, and if Slothrop, inversely, is a protagonist who is one among the disenfranchised preterite, then the novel is at risk of becoming undone or at the very least of losing its grip on the multiplicities that surge through its pages. This reversal of the epic tradition is grounded in the tragic formalism of the novel's narrative. That is to say, Slothrop is a tragic character formally sacrificed to the minor characters in an act that brings these characters squarely into the foreground in what I argue is structurally akin to the function of the chorus in Attic tragedy.

Slothrop is first framed as a potential sacrifice in the fourth part of the book, "The Zone." Up until this point, the shadow of death that hangs over Slothrop appears to be the product of his own paranoid delusions, themselves the product of the psychological training, conditioning, and torture he has been subject to at the White Visitation. This paranoia intensifies before his final destruction when he starts scratching the sign of the rocket into various surfaces: "Slothrop Besieged. Only after he'd left it half a dozen more places did it dawn on him that *what he – was really drawing was the A4 rocket*" (739). In a self-cursing action, it would appear that Slothrop is besieging himself with the sign of the A4 rocket, the symbol for a post-industrial humanity. As the carved signs stockpile like traces of his tragic destiny, Slothrop is eventually led to a crossroads:

> At last, lying one afternoon spread-eagled at his ease in the sun, at the edge of one of the ancient Plague towns he becomes a cross himself, a crossroads, a living intersection where the judges have come to set up a gibbet for a common criminal who is to be hanged at noon. (740)

His sacrificial framing here, as a cross at the junction, emphasizes the deathward trajectory of the rocket (X marks the spot) as a symbol of capitalist-militarized technology and also what will be the irresolution of Slothrop's sacrifice. The reference to "Plague towns," places where lepers were traditionally exiled, evokes those biopolitical categories of bare life rejected by both secular and sacred jurisdictions. This feeling of indeterminacy – of being a category of life that can be killed with impunity but whose death is unable to be raised to symbolic sacrifice – is figured by Slothrop becoming a living intersection at which some spectacular though non-sacrificial killing will later take place, with the unnamed "common

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criminal" to be unceremoniously "hanged at noon." While this is a moment when all the imagery points toward symbolic sacrifice, anything like catharsis is denied. Just beforehand, the narrator quotes a line from the last of Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*: "And though Earthliness forget you, To the stilled Earth say: I flow. To the rushing water speak: I am" (737). While Pynchon omits the preceding stanza from Rilke's poem, it might also be read in light of Slothrop becoming a cross at a crossroads. "Be, in this immeasurable night, magic power at your senses' crossroad, by the meaning of their strange encounter."[38] The effect of these lines, when taken together, builds to a romantic catharsis in which the lyrical Orpheus dissolves into nature. And, likewise, the next image is Slothrop stretched crosswise on the earth, Christ-like. The scene is ripe for a sacrifice, "where the judges have come to set up a gibbet for a common criminal who is to be hung at noon," and yet no such ritualized sacrifice or catharsis follows; rather, Slothrop keeps wandering, in search of the rocket.

Alenka Zupančič describes the tragedy of Oedipus in terms of anti-climax. Oedipus does not face the traditional tragic ending of destructive death, for "this would annul his existence as an outcast, and lead the tragedy back to a pure articulation of signifiers." Instead, Oedipus chooses "to continue his existence as a blind, directionless outcast."[39] Here we should think also of Beckett's suffering characters who make a farce of their interminable journeys: "(It's unending, it will be unending.) Gone where? Where do you go from there? You must go somewhere else," announces an unnamed protagonist, "wait somewhere else, for your turn to go again, and so on (a whole people, or I alone)."[40] Similarly, we get the sense that Slothrop in the end is walking in circles or at least is not making any linear progression toward his stated terminus, the V2 rocket: "Any number of directions he ought to be moving in, but he'd rather stay right here for now" (738). This aimless and lost wandering is an echo of the earlier descriptions of the moving preterite through the zone, gravitating toward an empty center or absolute zero; however, while those passages registered the melancholic mood of an infernal wandering, Slothrop's rootlessness gives itself over to comedy.

The seriousness of Slothrop's flight across the zone frequently devolves into the sort of clownish humor we find in Beckett, and like Beckett it is a sort of damaged humor, symptomatic of what Adorno famously described as a "bombed-out consciousness."[41] Likewise, comic entrapments are persistently forced into association, albeit in stark contrast, to the grim historical content that Pynchon mobilizes. Take, for example, the comic realization of Slothrop's Pavlovian conditioning, that his sexual reflexes

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respond to V2 rocket strikes. This conflux of orgasm and rocket explosion is comically out of time, with the sexual conquest precipitating the explosion, the humor of which rests on the polysemous verb of this sentence: "The strike can come as quickly as two days, or as slowly as ten. The mean lag is about 4½ days" (101). Appositely, this affliction, which will motivate Slothrop's journey through the Zone and instigate his destruction as well as the deaths of hundreds of others who are subject to the strike, is expressed via a sex joke performed by a sing-song performance:

THE PENIS HE THOUGHT WAS HIS OWN

(LEAD TENOR): 'Twas the penis, he thought-was, his own –
Just a big playful boy of a bone . . .
With a stout purple head,
Sticking up from the bed,
Where the girlies all played Telephone –
(BASS): Te-le-phone.. . .
(INNER VOICES): But They came through the hole in the night,
(BASS): And They sweet-talked it clear out of sight –
(INNER VOICES): Out of sight . . .
(TENOR) Now he sighs all alone,
With a heartbroken moan,
For the pe-nis, he thought was, his, owwwwn!
(INNER VOICES): Was, his, own! (258)

This choral performance commits Slothrop's symbolic castration to a catchy limerick, thematically expressing how effectively even the most private parts of the body have been co-opted into the biopolitical structures of capitalist modernity. More specifically, it speaks to the total subsumption of the individual in late capitalism; that all parts of one's being and sources of desire are subjected to the forces of production, in the reproduction of capital. This becomes particularly evident with the rise of all manner of immaterial forms of labor, and the comedy here appears as self-consciously aware of the performative labor involved in that subsumption. The very content of this song, that Slothrop's sexual reflexes anticipate rocket strikes, is entirely absurd, and so it seems appropriate that it would be packed into a five-line nonsense lyric. While these sorts of song are prevalent throughout all of Pynchon's novelistic output, in *Gravity's Rainbow* they play for a particularly parodic effect, not least because Slothrop is figured as Orpheus, "the father of songs," calling forth the mythic and tragic dimension of the novel. And yet it is not a harp but a harmonica that the lyrical Slothrop loses, and not to hell but down a

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toilet.[42] It is in the same way that Slothrop's relationship to a chorus orients the tragic structure but which is ultimately undone by a bathos that undermines the high seriousness of the genre.

Comic tunes increasingly mediate the tragic content of history. One example of this is the description of the Herero tribes comprising the native people of Nambia (historically German South West Africa). "In abandoned mine shafts," we are told, live the "Zone-Hereros, in exile for two generations from South-West Africa" (375). In this episode, a prehistory of genocide (the 1904 extermination order of the Herero by General Lothar von Trotha)[43] is reactivated against the even more recent history of the Nazi death camps. With this confluence of death, Pynchon recalls a history of rebellion wherein, as Maria Mies writes, Herero woman went on a birth strike so that "between 1892 and 1909, the Herero population decreased from 80,000 to a mere 19,962."[44] Echoing the organizational slogan of the Black Panthers and Huey P. Newton, namely, "revolutionary suicide," Pynchon frames this historical narrative as mass suicide: "Revolutionaries of the Zero, they mean to carry on what began among the old Hereros after the 1904 rebellion failed. They want a negative birthrate. The program is racial suicide. They would finish the extermination the Germans began in 1904" (377). While the Herero revolution is remade into racial suicide and equivalent with imperial extermination, Mies emphasizes the birth strike in terms of the Herero women's refusal to be subsumed within the "productive forces" of racial capitalism. To be sure, Pynchon seems to know as much when he explicitly narrates the mass sacrifice of Zone-Hereros in economic terms, in which the apocalyptic future of the Herero is described within a panoramic view of the capitalist world-system in the age of colonization:

> A generation earlier, the declining number of live Herero births was a topic of medical interest throughout Southern Africa. The whites looked on as anxiously as they would have an outbreak of rinderpest among the cattle. How provoking, to watch one's subject population dwindling like this, year after year. What's a colony without its dusky natives? Where's the fun if they're all going to die off? Just a big hunk of desert, no more maids, no field hands, nor laborers for the construction of the mining – wait, wait a minute there, yes it's Karl Marx, that sly old racist skipping away with his teeth together and his eyebrows up trying to make believe it's nothing but Cheap Labor and Overseas Markets . . .. Oh, no. Colonies are much, much more. Colonies are the outhouses of the European soul, where a fellow can let his pants down and relax, enjoy the smell of his own shit. Where he can fall on his slender prey roaring as loud as he feels like, and guzzle her blood with open joy. Eh? Where he can just wallow and rut and let himself go in a

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> softness, a receptive darkness of limbs, of hair as woolly as the hair of his forbidden genitals. Where the poppy, and cannabis and coca grow full and green, and not to the colors and style of death, as do ergot and agaric, the blight and fungus native to Europe. Christian Europe was always death, Karl, death and repression. (377)

This passage thinks about the relation between the metropolis and the colony in a way that emphasizes apposition between the division of immaterial and manufacture labor, on the one hand, and life and death, on the other. The Herero people are presented as the submerged unconscious of empire, offering a cathartic release from the affectless cathedrals and white marble statues of the metropolis. The tone, as with so many of the novels encountered in this book, is equal parts satiric and melancholic. It describes the population of Herero as "Cheap Labor," who inhabit colonies defined by their economic function as "Overseas Markets." What is being described, satirized, and eulogized here is a commodity frontier, where "cannabis and coca grow," and where the living labor comprises construction, mining, and resource extraction. The cathartic function of the colonies described in this passage is interesting when juxtaposed with an emphatically white central protagonist or tragic hero, namely, Slothrop, who serves as a focalizing placeholder for such emotion, as though the book wants to distinguish between systemic horror and individual tragedy, knowing that race might serve as shorthand for that distinction. Indeed, Pynchon takes historical genocide and quickly ironizes it in song. Again, the comic inversion of potential tragedy, this time a mass suicide, is initiated by the Zone-Hereroe's leader, Enzian:[45]

> SOLD ON SUICIDE
> Well I don't care-for, th' things I eat,
> Can't stand that boogie-woogie beat –
> But I'm sold, on, suicide!
>
> You can keep Der Bingle too, a-
> And that darn "bu-bu-bu-boo,"
> Cause I'm sold on suicide!
>
> Oh! I'm not too keen on ration stamps,
> Or Mothers who used to be baby vamps,
> But I'm sold, on, suicide!
> Don't like either, the Cards or Browns,
> Piss on the country and piss on the town,
> But I'm S.O.S., yes well actually this goes on, verse after verse,
> for quite some time.. . . (381)

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The comic treatment of the aggressively humorless content here emphasizes very explicitly the dangers in attempting to capture real historical violence in an aesthetic form. But it also indicates something else. That the genocide of a people is given the same treatment as the silliness of Slothrop's sex life suggests that in late capitalism everything is flattened out and made equivalent; everything is homogenized and standardized into the one despoiled subsistence.

It is in this sense that Slothrop, as a tragi-comic pseudo-hero, should in part be viewed as a symptom of late capitalism, focalizing a book whose encyclopedic crowding of characters, styles, genres, and history manifests a sensitivity toward the saturated space of postmodernism. This reading of comedy in *Gravity's Rainbow* as a form of pastiche, as opposed to parody, comes to a head in the account of Slothrop's sacrifice. The manifestation of Slothrop's tragic fall brings together the generic coding of tragedy with its historical significance at the levels of content and form:

> (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. There's supposed to be a last photograph of him on the only record album ever put out by The Fool, an English rock group – seven musicians posed, in the arrogant style of the early Stones, near an old rocket-bomb site, out in the East End, or South of the River. It is Spring, and French thyme blossoms in amazing white lacework across the cape of green that now hides and softens the true shape of the old rubble. There is no way to tell which of the faces is Slothrop's: the only printed credit that might apply to him is "Harmonica, kazoo – a friend." But knowing his Tarot, we would except to look for him among the Humility, among the gray and preterite souls, to look for him adrift in the hostile light of the sky, the darkness of the sea . . .) (881)

As if to mark his earlier "scattering," in which he is broken piecemeal, Slothrop is literally bracketed from the text in a parenthetical fragment. Note, too, the direct references to Slothrop in this passage. References made to "fragments" and "personae," "The Fool, an English rock group," deliver a typically postmodern way of writing by referencing popular culture and betraying a dependence on intertextuality. This contrasts with more classically modernist and premodern ways of writing, here taking the form of romantic, natural imagery – "It is spring," "French thyme blossoms," "cape of green." In this half of the passage, Slothrop is absent and so we might say that his removal from language allows the expression of a particularly literary being to proliferate. This is set in contrast to Slothrop being described as immanently multiplied where he is likened to the

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botanical generation of "offshoots," a metaphor that ambiguously connects his withering away to the reactivation of a mythic origin or genesis in which we can now expect to look for him among the collective Humility. At another level, "offshoots" should be read in light of Slothrop's Pavlovian reflex, and so the entire passage doubles as the iteration of another sex joke, directed at Slothrop's seed, scattered everywhere and impregnating everyone. Ultimately, this passage expresses the formal drift of Slothrop across the course of the novel, as bits and pieces of him end up in film, songs, and newspaper clippings, as he passes through the filter of pop culture. Here the style is uneven, shifting between the typically postmodern descriptions of Slothrop to a more pastoral and romantic form of expression, and it is an unevenness that might express the tension between comic and tragic registers as they tear at the representational contours of Slothrop. And yet we can also take the entire paragraph as an exercise in pastiche, where romantic language and pastoral imagery are simply the imitation of style devoid of any real poetic intensity. In this context, Slothrop can be seen as a postmodern mishmash of various competing styles and genres, so that the superficial ephemerality of his character is unable to hold these shifting and slippery surfaces together. While Slothrop is in the end reduced to something entirely cartoonish, some melancholic specter of loss nevertheless emanates from the last sentence wherein Sothrop is folded back into a historical milieu. It's as if this feeling, melancholy, which articulates in so many descriptions of the preterite, cannot be wholly done away with, even amid the postmodern cleverness, radical exteriorization, and dismemberment of character displayed here. Even if Slothrop is to be seen as an agglomeration of ephemera, the passage above expresses a more general narrative structure wherein he is dissolved into the vast character network, a gesture of sacrifice but also a figure of unemployment, as the tragic hero becomes one "among the gray and preterite souls," doomed to eternity in and as the surplus population.

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