

# INTRATEXTUALITY, TRAUMA AND THE POSTHUMAN IN THOMAS PYNCHON'S BLEEDING EDGE

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## ABSTRACT:

In *Bleeding Edge* Pynchon uses again a female unconventional detective, as he did in *The Crying of Lot 49*, with the ultimate aim of evaluating the condition of America. However, whereas Oedipa had to deal with an understanding of American society in terms of science and religion, in *Bleeding Edge* Maxine is at pains to understand a society ruled by the new paradigms of posthumanity and trauma. By focusing on the binary life/death, the article evaluates Pynchon's portrayal of current society as posthuman and disrupted by a new type of social stagnation related to the control of information flow, a situation that demands the role of an active protagonist, in line with later theories in the field of trauma studies. The textual analysis points to information, terrorism, and web addiction as the new dangers that Maxine has to cope with if she wants to pull society back to motion.

KEYWORDS: Pynchon, posthumanity, trauma, entropy, resilience

In this world of paranoid connection and impersonal power, the imagination of the individual is the last refuge of will.—Leo Braudy on Ellison's *Invisible Man*

## Introduction: Two Heroines for Two Different Times

The role that categorical or binary thinking plays in our perception of life has been a reiterative theme in Pynchon's fiction since the publication of his early short stories (see Keesey 15–37). Along the past fifty years the interpretations his fiction has offered of American society have necessarily evolved, frequently describing past situations to warn about possible risks for our future, but always showing an authorial concern about the specific binary life/death and its scientific correlated concepts of perpetual motion and entropy. This article contends that Pynchon pursues his characteristic sociohistorical analysis in *Bleeding Edge* (2013) by resorting again to the reiterative binary. However, this time his critical eye points to the combined effects the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the new technologies had on American society at the beginning of the third millennium. Throughout his analysis, the writer draws a portrait of contemporary life where the old limits between death and life, here reflected in the new version of the binary physical/virtual, are continuously trespassed by a posthuman being that has emerged from the current application of bleeding-edge technologies to our vital experience. In addition to being his first novel to address openly the collective trauma of 9/11, in *Bleeding Edge* Pynchon uses again literary patterns that reenact, almost fifty years later, Oedipa Maas's quest for the meaning of the United States of America. The writer portrays once more a female unconventional detective, but this time the protagonist's main role is to gather sufficient information for the reader to ponder the pervasive and disturbing effects that the imbrication of the new paradigms of posthumanity and trauma have in our present understanding of life (cf. Luckhurst 157–68). Intratextually following the

questing path in *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Bleeding Edge* responds to its author's old literary endeavor to understand the ways "social energy" moves and changes along time. In 2001 social energy had already taken the shape of a posthuman being who, as intuited by Oedipa in Pynchon's second novel, is now understood basically as informational energy. However, this being suffers from an important weakness: Pynchon describes the posthuman individual as heavily traumatized, thus becoming easy prey for the unknown rulers of a social system whose aim has become the control of the new virtual sites of information.

The protagonist, Jewish fraud-investigator Maxine Tarnow, is a female riddle-solver who follows a quest for knowledge in a story that starts with the words "It's the first day in spring 2001," and carries her to the moment, about one year later, when "pear trees have exploded into bloom" (*BE* 475). However, the annual cycle of 2001, which suffered the deadly disruption of September 11, discloses through Maxine's eyes the existence of a society very different from the one that Oedipa Maas was at pains to understand in 1966 for readers of *The Crying of Lot 49*. In Pynchon's later novel the ideological paradigms that shape our present perception of American society have experienced substantial changes and are now associated not only to political but also to biological dangers. The new pseudo-haven of virtual reality induces emotions of power that result in cybernetic web addiction, new feelings that demand at the end of the story the need to go back to traditional human affections that may help in the healing of a society diagnosed as strongly traumatized. The following pages offer a contrastive analysis of the two heroines' quests with the ultimate aim of evaluating Pynchon's bleak understanding of American society at the beginning of the new millennium and the critical response he gives to its present condition.

### **The Nature of the Heroine's Quest: Henry Adams', V. Energy, and the Two Female Detectives in the Universe of Information**

Although briefly, some reviewers of *Bleeding Edge* soon pointed out some obvious similarities between the characters of Oedipa Maas and Maxine Tarnow (Robson 56; Nelson 58). Both protagonists are searching for clues to solve an enigma in a world of male power, things seem to remain uncertain at the end of their respective adventures, and there is no ultimate disclosure of any final truth. In fact, Pynchon's fiction reveals the existence of a reiterative motif where a female personage frequently appears linked to the existence of a quest for knowledge. In some occasions, the quest has as one of its principal aims to find the absent female—V., *Vineland*, and *Inherent Vice* are the most obvious cases. However, both in *The Crying of Lot 49* and in *Bleeding Edge* the turn is for the female protagonist to search for the ultimate truth about an indefinite goal that eventually proves to be the social and moral condition of the country. In both versions of the Pynchonian quest, the reader is trapped in a literary universe of choices, with fate and chance eventually becoming the two sides of the same coin. *Bleeding Edge* proves again that the adoption of certain choices related to his protagonist's active role inevitably results in new possibilities: social "energy" and the ways his heroines help to release it are key elements in Pynchon's universe.

As Pynchon's early fiction already discloses, the main link existing between a female protagonist and the condition of society can be found in the intertextual use the author does of Henry Adams's ideas on entropy and force—or energy—with reference to social change, also imitating the historian's peculiar way of referring to himself in the third person. Both traits already define the character of Callisto, the main male personage in the short story "Entropy" (1960), and they become also the defining features of Stencil—one of the two protagonists of Pynchon's first novel *V.* (1963)—a methodical quester for the meaning of the female energy represented in the mysterious Lady V. Callisto explicitly refers to Adams's essay "The Dynamo and the Virgin" (Chapter 25 of *The Education of Henry Adams*), where the historian, after a visit to the Paris Universal Exposition of 1900, develops some of his theories about the nature of social "force," suggesting connections between an ancient, female energy, represented in Venus and the Virgin, and the ways in which modern civilization deals with the different manifestations of energy. In his *Education* Adams also shows his preoccupation with the effects of the Law of entropy in society

(Chapters 33 and 34). A sociological interpretation emerges from the pages of his autobiography where an elemental reproductive energy, which is for him represented in the female (Venus), passes on to the Christian cult dedicated to the Virgin, a social and spiritual force that eventually becomes replaced by mechanical power, when science and technology take over the social space left by religion. From there, mechanical energy turns into electricity, condensed in the huge dynamos Adams sees at the Paris Exposition, and, finally, into a fifth disturbing stage represented by radium. Within his apparently chaotic but impressively constructed literary universe, with energy and entropy engaged in a persistent fight, we may recognize Pynchon's insistent but ironic attempts to metaphorize Adams's theories and sociological inquiries in his fiction and, thus, evaluate the ways social energy manifests along different periods of time. Following his literary thread, social stagnation, both in Oedipa's adventure in the 1960s and in Maxine's at the beginning of the twenty-first century, seems to be the writer's diagnosis. In both cases, energy needs to flow again if democracy and freedom are to prevail. Especially at the beginning of the story, Pynchon provides readers of *Bleeding Edge* with abundant clues to support the parallelisms existing between the two female protagonists who are questing to find out the conditions of social energy at their respective times. Not only are they engaged in a quest for knowledge, but both women have also been lovers of men related to the real estate business (we should consider here the literal meaning of "real estate"; *Lot 49* 1, *BE* 17), they are also parodically associated to the Virgin (*Lot 49* 118–27; *BE* 13, 170), they have been involved with a number of men who are unable to help them or who simply abandon them (*Lot 49* 111, 117–18; *BE* 288), ironically the two female questers are associated to consumerist Tupperware parties (*Lot 49* 5; *BE* 220), and both are fond of driving an Impala (*Lot 49* 14; *BE* 22, 474–75). The Impala also offers a metaphoric intratextual link to a reiterative Pynchonian motto associated to the flow of energy: the animal after which the car is named is characterized by its powerful bouncing movements, *keep it bouncing* being the clue offered to Oedipa by her lover Pierce Inverarity in anticipation of her need to solve the traps of binary thinking. Pierce's advice helps her to realize that excluded middles "were bad shit" (*Lot 49* 125). Since then, "bouncing" has become a reiterative term in Pynchon's fiction, and it happens again in *Bleeding Edge* (2, 112, 187, 214, etc.). In addition, if Oedipa becomes attracted to the secret organization of Tristero, represented by the acronym WASTE and by the muted-horn symbol that she finds in public toilets, the notions of waste, garbage, and toilets are abundantly present throughout Maxine's adventure (32, 43, 158, 166, 169, 236, etc.), including a long passage dedicated to the actual Island of Meadows, which is surrounded by garbage but also has greedy real estate developers after it, as will happen to the Internet portal DeepArcher in the virtual world the novel describes, a site represented by an avatar characterized by Tristero features (*BE* 167).

However, differences between the roles assigned to the two heroines are also notorious because there have been substantial changes in our understanding of reality. Almost fifty years have passed from one adventure to the other, and Oedipa and Maxine belong to different spaces: West and East, Californian pre-Silicon Valley bubble and New York's post-Silicon Alley bubble. Even if, as happens to the classic mythic hero, both protagonists receive an actual call into adventure (cf. Campbell 45–54), Oedipa's call into action comes already in the first paragraph of *The Crying of Lot 49* by way of the letter that names her co-executor of the will of her former lover, real estate mogul Pierce Inverarity. However, readers have to wait till the end of chapter 1 in *Bleeding Edge* for Maxine to know that somebody called Reg wants to see her (*BE* 7). Previously, though, she has received a misleading call from somebody else (Trevor), and many other calls still wait for her answer when she arrives at her office. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, entropic noise actually suffocates Maxine because people already live through the age of information overload that had been foreseen in the pages of Pynchon's second novel. Additionally, even if both women are defined by their detective roles, the manner Pynchon handles gender relations in *Bleeding Edge* has also changed substantially. If the implication at the end of *The Crying of Lot 49* is that fragile Oedipa has become a symbolic manifestation of Adams' V. energy as Virgin, whose metaphorical pregnancy announces "the possibilities of revolution" (Schaub 31; see also Baker 136–38), Maxine, on the contrary, becomes an active evaluator of social energy. She is a vigorous hardboiled detective, packing a Beretta, ready to help

people in distress, and capable of facing Gabriel Ice, the real estate now turned dot-com mogul and archenemy in this quest for social energy set at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

### **Coping with the Life/Death Binary: From the Sense of Apocalypse to the Belief in Escaping Death**

Since his early fiction, Pynchon's protagonists fluctuate between active motion and stagnation—scientific correlates of the binary life/death—to offer an indication that the social system is a battlefield where energy continuously clashes with entropy. The pair Stencil/Profane in *V.* represents one of the most obvious examples of the author's interest in the issue; the first character is described as an active quester, always counterbalanced by the second, emotionally “entropic” personage. Thus the two protagonists of Pynchon's first novel disclose that, as Adams intended, Pynchon also attempts to translate into social literary metaphors the effects of the First and Second Laws of Thermodynamics. Despite the book's brevity, in *The Crying of Lot 49* the life/death binary acquires a more complex interpretation. At the beginning of the narrative, Oedipa is presented as an entropic childless housewife, who frequently invokes the name of God without any apparent reason—a first clue to understand that she is still trapped in the religious paradigm—and who attends consumerist Tupperware parties where she gets drunk; she is a repressed housewife in need of initiating an adventure that will transform her into a bouncing, even if parodic detective. Apparently, Oedipa will not be able to fulfill her job as co-executor of Inverarity's will, but she will be revealed some important things. The first one is the existence of the dark side of American society, of people who are underprivileged and invisible to the system, symbolized in the unofficial Tristero; progressively, her eyes of middle-class Republican housewife will open to the other reality of the unofficial minorities of the country. By deploying a complex story built out of different symbolic but reflecting layers of signification, Pynchon is able to offer in only a few dozen pages an outstanding analysis of the two paradigms that, centered on the complementary binaries of life/death, information/noise, and heat/cold, still coexisted to provide the main interpretation of Western reality at the time: (Christian) religion and science. Echoing the role played by Maxwell's demon in the field of thermodynamics, whose function is to sort out hot from cold molecules (*Lot 49* 72–74), Oedipa and readers alike are invited to ascend onto the Christian paradigm that predicates the teleological promise of the Final Judgment, where a part of the humankind will be saved, while the other will be damned. Throughout Oedipa's complex quest for meaning, religion (sorting out the chosen from the damned), and the scientific fields of thermodynamics (sorting out the hot from the cold) and information theory (sorting out valid information from noise), become Pynchon's interpretive instruments to force his protagonist out of her entropic passivity, turning her into a hyperactive person who ends up bouncing up and down California, hunting for clues, meeting different types of people, and reaching an intense state of doubts and perhaps paranoia (see Palmieri 985–96). As mentioned above, it is the recollection of Inverarity's advice, “Keep it bouncing” (*Lot 49* 123), that convinces an exhausted Oedipa to go on, at the same time pondering the reasons why Inverarity involved her in an adventure whose “legacy was America” (123–24). She thinks that either her appointment as co-executor of his will was only Inverarity's hoax, or perhaps Tristero really existed and the mogul wanted his former lover to find it out. But Oedipa also thinks of a third possibility: “Or he might even have tried to survive death, as a paranoia; as a pure conspiracy against someone he loved” (123–24). It is at this stage of epistemological anxiety about the meaning of death that Oedipa discerns another meaningful discovery: she glimpses the possibility of joining Tristero “in its twilight,” and remains “waiting for a symmetry of choices to break down, to go skew. She had heard all about excluded middles; they were bad shit, to be avoided; and how had it ever happened here, with the chances once so good for diversity?” (125). At this stage in the narrative, the protagonist's quest becomes a symbolic announcement of the 1960s delivery of social change, her story taking place when the struggle for new Adamsian “social energy” still remains undecided (see Cowart 134). Many years later, in a key passage close to the end of *Bleeding Edge*, the significant link between

evildoers and immortality is associated to devilish magnate Gabriel Ice when Maxine points her gun at his face:

“It doesn’t happen,” Ice carefully watching the muzzle.

“How’s that, Gabe.”

“I don’t die. There is no scenario where I die.”

“Batshit fuckin insane,” March out the car window.

“Better hop on in there with your mom, Tallis. Gabe, that’s good to hear,” Maxine calm and upbeat, “and the reason you don’t die? is that you come to your senses. Start thinking about this on a longer time scale and, most important, walk away.” (473)

What may have induced Ice to think that there is no scenario where he dies? Can money buy immortality? One might think that Pynchon is simply offering readers a warning that evil is something perpetual, but in *Bleeding Edge* the significance of the binary life/death has experienced important changes since the years in which Oedipa’s story took place. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, religion and classic physics have been displaced by two other powerful paradigms that have modified previous beliefs about the unsettling binary and, thus, our present understanding of life; Oedipa’s demand for social conciliation in California has now moved into a new zone. A billionaire does not need to be mentally insane to believe in the possibilities of immortality, and more so if, as happens to Ice, he has made his money in the new technologies. Does entropy also rule in the Internet?

### Spaces of the Physical and the Virtual: In Transit to Restoring Pynchonian Balance

In line with the posthuman paradigm, in *Bleeding Edge* the notion of immortality is thematically associated to the author’s use of the binary physical/virtual, which, despite its apparent novelty, can be traced back also to *The Crying of Lot 49*. As mentioned above, Oedipa’s detective role is symbolized on a thermodynamic level by the sorting activities of Maxwell’s demon—whose aim is to attain a permanent source of energy (*Lot 49* 72; see Palmieri 981). The activities of both—the demon in thermodynamics and Oedipa as detective—find a correlation in a religious idea whose symbolism also saturates the novel: the Christian belief in the Final Judgment announced in the Book of Revelation, when the Elect will be blessed and the Preterite sentenced to eternal fire. All these sorting activities are also backed by two theories about the human being that Thomas Pynchon seemed to have in mind at the time of writing his second novel, theories that more than fifty years ago clearly foresaw the importance information was to have in our present understanding of being and life. One theory was authored by Marshall McLuhan in his path-breaking collection of essays *Understanding Media* (1964), where he unfolds a number of ideas that confirm Pynchon’s analysis of the evolution of the human being into a new posthuman creature—which saw its first stages of evolution in the cyborg figure represented by the Lady V. of his first novel. McLuhan’s notion of self-amputation, which he puts forward in the essay “Narcissus as Narcosis,” establishes the price the human being has to pay at this stage of evolution: “Any invention or technology is an extension or self-amputation of our physical bodies, and such extension also demands new ratios or new equilibriums among the other organs and extensions of the body” (49). The sociologist’s well-known consideration of humans as electrodes in the communicative circuitry of the new global village is echoed by Oedipa when, approaching San Narciso (an obvious reference to McLuhan’s essay), she senses the important role information will play in her quest, an adventure where finding communication patterns will be of the utmost importance for her:

She looked down a slope [...] on to a vast sprawl of houses which had grown up all together [...] from the dull brown earth; and she thought of the time she’d opened a transistor radio to replace a battery and seen her first printed circuit. The ordered swirl of houses and streets, from this high angle, sprang at her now with the same unexpected, astonishing clarity as the circuit card had. Though she knew even less about radios than about Southern Californians, there were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate. (14–15)

In the Introduction to his collection of stories *Slow Learner*, Pynchon unveils a second important source for his fiction, Norbert Wiener's *The Human Use of Human Beings* (1954), a book that he had the opportunity to read while writing his story "Entropy," "at about the same time as *The Education of Henry Adams*" (SL 15), and which clarifies the writer's reiterative use of motifs linking his characters to processes of communication but also to the notion of wastage. Wiener offers in his book a devastating description of the human species, which stands totally apart from any previous humanist representation of it. In his terms, the human body is nothing but an ephemeral container, exposed to the effects of entropy. Basing his research on computational calculus, Wiener's main aim was to create artificial intelligence, which he did by emulating the binary way in which the human brain works and thus codifying information in bits of ones and zeroes, also a clear informational metaphor for the reiterative binaries that appear in Pynchon's fiction, such as life/death, hot/cold, above/below, or information/noise in the case of *The Crying of Lot 49*. Out of Wiener's theories, a new posthuman entity emerges where the old humanist being is reduced to informational patterns. In his own words:

Our tissues change as we live: the food we eat and the air we breathe become flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone, and the momentary elements of our flesh and bone pass out of our body everyday with our excreta. We are but whirlpools in a river of ever-flowing water. We are not stuff that abides, but patterns that perpetuate themselves. (96)

However, not being happy in a universe ruled only by patterns of ones and zeroes, Oedipa will choose to discard the Aristotelian rule of the excluded middle. Hence, Pynchon writes her story in an experimental narrative that makes impossible any assertive, one-sided, or categorical reading of it. The literary seeds have been planted to understand a new paradigm of being, where the humanist is finally replaced by the posthuman and by the notion that we are basically information patterns (see Hayles 1–49). Accordingly, in the Pynchonian universe meaning assertiveness becomes at a loss, and the writer focuses his attention on middles that are not excluded and zones that literally or metaphorically escape or seem to escape from the rule of the either/or.

The popularization of Pynchon's literary perspectives on the evolution of the human being found its echoes also in the grounds of science fiction, a factor that the writer uses intertextually in *Bleeding Edge* to confirm the validity of his insights from fifty years ago. In his book *Constructing Postmodernism* (1992), Brian McHale already contended that cyberpunk fiction implied the technological realization of postmodernism's literary metaphors (246). In this sense, Oedipa's symbolic resemblance to Maxwell's demon and her intuitive understanding of San Narciso's landscape as an informational pattern where the houses and, by extension, the people inhabiting them look like linking electrodes in the process of communication become physical in the cyberpunk process of "leaving the meat behind." The sentence was coined by William Gibson to refer to the process of connection into cyberspace. In his novel *Neuromancer* (1984), the cyberpunk writer managed to condense most of the characteristics of the new sci-fi subgenre. From its first sentence *Neuromancer* pays homage to Pynchon's most reiterative binaries of death/life, above/below, or visible/occult ("The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel"; see McHale 232). Its pages become saturated with plots and paranoia, with groups that belong to the darkest areas of society and that try to control or, otherwise, oppose a system ruled by the (almost) immortal very rich, who govern society with the help of AIs, literary updates of the artificial intelligence Wiener helped to create. When Gibson's protagonists hook into the computer, they leave their bodies behind almost permanently; in the process they become reduced to informational patterns, and the gates of immortality open for them.<sup>1</sup>

If Gibson's first novel represents the actualization of the Pynchonian literary universe and its reiterative motifs into a materialized realm of posthuman cyborgs and virtual beings, *Bleeding Edge* offers an extra intertextual loop that goes back to Gibson's cyberpunk universe to deal with "virtual" immortality. Following a similar detective pattern, in 2013 Pynchon's fiction has jumped from Oedipa's analysis of the physical "real estate" of American society in the 1960s to the new role

played by information in the development of virtual reality and its resulting posthuman paradigm. *Bleeding Edge* is not only the first direct literary response Pynchon offers about the 9/11 terrorist attacks; it is also a novel about the ways in which information flows and is manipulated in our present posthuman world, and a warning that (any type of) terrorism works by controlling the flow of informational energy because information has become the most effective weapon to keep society subdued or politically stagnant. Oedipa's early insights about the changes humanity was to experience and the importance that informational flows have in the understanding and development of modern society have resulted in *Bleeding Edge* in the conviction that information is the present stage of that "force" or social energy whose ways Henry Adams was trying to understand at the beginning of the twentieth century, a force that now is transmitted through cyberspace: In *Bleeding Edge V*, is for Virtual. Thus information, turned into electric pulses in the new virtual reality, brings with it intimations of immortality. Accordingly, Pynchon evaluates the notions of being and informational energy in the year that represents the crossing into a new millennium, also the moment when the flow of social energy is disrupted by the 9/11 attacks; and to carry out his analysis, he relies on Gibson's literary framework.

*Bleeding Edge* is saturated with expressions that explicitly refer to the posthuman stage of present society. In addition, its story also shows clear parallelisms with Gibson's novel *Pattern Recognition* (2003), and virtual cyberspace becomes the new Pynchonian zone where, allegedly, entropy does not rule. Thus the physical reality perceived in the novel is referred to as "meatspace" (BE 77, 168, 359 . . .), Maxine's former husband Horst may lapse "into sad-sack mode" (304), or the narrator comment that "The sky takes on a brushed-aluminum underglow" (169). In Gibson's novel *Pattern Recognition*, where the 9/11 attacks also occupy a significant position, a female marketing consultant plays the role of a gifted but amateur detective, clearly marked by traces of Oedipa Maas, who, like Pynchon's earlier heroine, suspects the whole pattern to be a hoax (Gibson 90). Anticipating what happens to Maxine Tarnow, Gibson's protagonist Cayce tries to solve a riddle related to a mysterious film that has been distributed, in fragmented clips, via the Internet. Cayce's search for ultimate meaning and pattern recognition involves, in any case, the negotiation of her human intuition with the audiovisual information transmitted by the bleeding-edge technologies that also play a significant role in Pynchon's plot. Audiovisual technology might be as unreliable as the human eye. In any case, the footage presented to Maxine in *Bleeding Edge* never takes its protagonists—other than March—to anticipate the origin or to understand the ultimate reasons for the terrorist attacks, nor to prevent them. If anything, in the fictional world of Pynchon's novel the DVD given to Maxine serves the purpose to know March Kelleher's political interpretation of the terrorist attacks, who openly blames Bush and the Mossad for them and for the political use they did of the events. In September 2013, when *Bleeding Edge* was released, similar interpretations of the attacks were anything but new, but the association of terrorism to bleeding-edge technology points to Pynchon's conviction that the new ways through which information is transmitted represent a permanent danger for democratic values. If, in the writer's terms, America wants to bounce back to life and freedom, the dangers of posthuman virtuality have to be exposed, an exposure that in the novel is associated, through Maxine's eyes, to the understanding of contemporary life as a site of trauma.

If at the beginning of the twenty-first century social energy manifests as information, who may control cyberspace poses an eventual threat for freedom. Once more, parallelisms with *The Crying of Lot 49* start to surface. As happened to Inverarity, Gabriel Ice is also associated to the Devil, and, as befell Oedipa, Maxine's mission is to evaluate the mogul's assets. Early in the story, Reg informs Maxine that he is shooting a film for Ice and his computer-security firm *hashslingrz*, but Reg literally declares that he has not sold his soul yet to (the devil) Ice and wants Maxine to find out who he is really working for. Reg's expert in computer tampering Eric Outfield thinks that Ice has "a purpose on earth written in code none of us can read. Except maybe for 666" (11). In this way, echoing Oedipa's mission, the protagonist becomes involved in a quest to unveil "deep, sinister" patterns that takes her out of her normal field of investigation, which concerns mostly sound, real estate. Maxine shares with Oedipa and Gibson's Cayce "a tendency to look for hidden patterns" (BE 22) that, this

time, she will have to look for also in the posthuman deep web. “Coincidentally” she is friends with Vyrva, who is married to Justin, a Californian programmer who has devised with his friend Lucas the Internet deep-web site DeepArcher, which includes a security design that Ice wants to buy from them (36). Thus Pynchon’s fiction moves from his 1966 analysis of real property as the object of capitalist rapacity to the analysis of the virtual and its hidden or “dark” side (cf. Tristero), but DeepArcher or “departure” is not a normal site; it is defined as a virtual *journey* that leaves no traces, therefore avoiding the traps of binary thinking (37). The site is described as the result of negotiating the different views its two creators originally had:

Justin wanted to go back in time, to a California that had never existed, safe, sunny all the time, where in fact the sun never set unless somebody wanted to see a romantic sunset. Lucas was searching for someplace, you could say, a little darker, where it rains a lot and great silences sweep like wind, holding inside them forces of destruction. What came out as synthesis was DeepArcher. (74)

Thus Justine and Lucas’s creation becomes another symbolic reinforcement of Oedipa’s realization of the necessity to avoid excluding middles to balance human energy. The result becomes a virtual representation of what life is or should be about, a site developed into a new Pynchonian promise of negotiation that becomes strongly linked to the second contemporary paradigm the novel investigates.

### The Posthuman Site of Collective Trauma: Answer or Trap?

Through Maxine’s quest and filtered by his reiterative binaries, in *Bleeding Edge* Pynchon describes contemporary society as the site of a structurally traumatized social condition brought forth by the misappropriation and control of collective suffering, by its commodification through posthuman web addiction and information overload, and by the blurring of limits between victim and perpetrator.

In effect, echoing Maxwell’s demon’s promise to stop entropy, DeepArcher soon acquires a condition of refuge. However, it ends up being only a promise of never-fulfilled perpetual life, even if some of the characters in the novel, including the site’s creators, believe in its possibilities to escape from entropy. Justin comments that it was not conceived to evolve but to be timeless: “A refuge. History-free is what Lucas and I were hoping for” (373), that is to say, a closed system where the passing of time would not affect the flow of information. Falling soon in its delusive trap, Maxine believes in the power the virtual portal shows to cope with the effects of our mortality; DeepArcher is a site where, allegedly, you can also encounter the dead, a limbo zone where nobody is elect or preterite, dead or alive, a refuge to overcome the effects of what some scholars qualify as the structural traumatized condition of being.<sup>2</sup> She even meets there—or thinks she meets—Lester Traipse, a personage who has been murdered by an alleged government agent. Nevertheless, following the traumatic events of 9/11 the deep website loses its secrecy and becomes a populated simulacrum for mourning where Maxine now sees “bereaved survivors, perhaps foreign and domestic, bagmen, middlemen, paramilitary [...] For those who may be genuine casualties, likenesses have been brought here by loved ones so they’ll have an afterlife, their faces scanned in from family photos, ...” (357–58).

Later, the protagonist finds in a corner café a woman who might be the Archer herself and who links the story again to Pynchon’s second novel and the notion of immortality. The mysterious woman’s mission, in her own words, reinscribes Oedipa’s aim at the end of her own quest; it consists of finding out how long she can “stay just at the edge of the beginning before the Word, see how long I can gaze in till I get vertigo—lovesick, nauseous, whatever—and fall in” (358). Oedipa expected the revelation of the primordial Word that might explain it all, a revelation preceded by the nausea of her alleged pregnancy (*Lot 49* 118–25). But she was expecting the transcendental Word or Logos as meaning of the physical world, not the virtual and simulated Word the mysterious woman—Oedipa’s virtual representation?—refers to as the origin of DeepArcher’s codification. In

addition, it is precisely the presumed capacity the site has to offer no revelation or trace of the information it contains or has contained that makes it the object of desire of the new developers of the virtual world (*BE* 78). Explicitly, Pynchon warns his readers of the dangers of bleeding-edge technologies because they have become the mechanism his mysterious “They”—here referred to by March as “the overlords”—deploy to rule over the destinies even of billionaires like Ice (474); the refuge against entropy that DeepArcher represents is already being appropriated by Them. The real estate moguls who played the role of the villain in some of Pynchon’s earlier novels are now changed into new dot-com corporations that try to control the web to keep people as their slaves, impeding the free flow of useful information and taking advantage of the overload of information that saturates the virtual world. As Eric tells Maxine, “Look at it, everyday more lusers than users, keyboards and screens turning into nothin but portals to Web sites for what the Management wants everybody addicted to, shopping, gaming, jerking off, streaming endless garbage—” (432). The information journey with intimations of perpetual motion that had been promised by the DeepArcher designers becomes, thus, assimilated into the system by means of information overload, simulated mourning, and the misappropriation of traumatic events.

One of the basic tenets supported by the first theorists of trauma studies states that the victim has to struggle with language to assimilate the traumatic experience, since it is only through narrative representation that one (re)constructs the source of the conflict and may thus dispel its pathological effects (Laub 61–75). However, Pynchon does not seem to agree with this tenet. In fact, his protagonist eventually sides with more contemporary critical views on the issue, concerned with the manipulation and overuse of trauma representations (see Rothberg xii–xvii), views that may even question the validity of narrative to soothe or eradicate traumatic pain.<sup>3</sup> In the present age of information, even narratives that try to work through traumatic events are controllable; *Bleeding Edge* describes a twenty-first-century order in which virtual reality has already become the most powerful instrument to control the informational patterns that constitute our posthuman beings. Our condition has become emotionally exposed to the trauma paradigm, which centers on an updated binary representation of life that may trigger new anxieties related to the capacity to define ourselves. In concurrence with the political manipulation of trauma narratives, in the new paradigm society is divided into the many victims and the few perpetrators who ensnare the former by means of violence and informational terror.<sup>4</sup> By linking the victims’ condition to entropic suffering and death, Pynchon warns that the flow of information eventually may result in enslavement by fear: the reader-witness of trauma representations may become mentally weak, infected by the pervasive definition of the subject as victim in that type of narrative.

Maxine starts to draw connections between information and trauma at an early stage of her quest, glimpsing at the existence of the sinister design. After reflecting on the uses of the accumulated garbage that surrounds the Island of Meadows, the female detective infers that garbage is also the result of a collective, if hidden, history of suffering, and the narrator soon discloses that “Like the Island of Meadows, DeepArcher also has developers after it” (167); both physical and virtual refuges are being taken by the system. Searching for answers in her increasing visits to the virtual refuge of DeepArcher, Maxine talks to the deceased Lester, but she also tries to find there his alleged murderer, Windust, the agent of an unknown agency also killed by unknown assassins. Readers are informed that both men, victim and perpetrator-turned-victim, have in common “unbalanced accounts” in their former lives, a condition that Pynchon has repetitively associated to the notion of karma, itself a reflection of Inverarity’s “keep it bouncing” in the writer’s particular quest to denounce the entropic areas of social exclusion the status quo creates. Karmic balance is a recurrent notion also in the pages of *Bleeding Edge* because healing from trauma requires emotional balance but social karma also requires the redefinition of the roles of victim and perpetrator, as Maxine has to hear from her friend Shawn: America is “living on borrowed time. Getting away cheap. Never caring about who’s paying for it, who’s starving somewhere else all jammed together so we can have cheap food, a house, a yard in the burbs . . . planetwide, more every day, the payback keeps gathering. And meantime the only help we get from the media is boohoo the innocent dead” (340).

Nevertheless, at this time the protagonist is not ready yet to understand that she has taken for granted the role of America as the guiltless victim of terrorism. Still as a living being in physical reality, Windust helps Maxine to realize the connection existing between the 9/11 terrorist attacks—and their collective traumatic effects—to the new posthuman condition of virtual America. When he shows his contempt for the people who, immersed in their necessity to work through their trauma, shared in the web their emotions after the terrorist attacks—“An army of the clueless, who think they own 11 September”—Maxine surprises him by disclosing her belief that it was all a sinister pattern to manipulate the people’s traumatized emotions: “Hey, why shouldn’t them, they bought it from you, we all did, you took our own precious sorrow, processed it, sold it back to us like any other product” (377).

However, the effects of trauma misappropriation even in the Internet ironically have extended also to Maxine. She has become another easy prey for the new paradigmatic conditions of the country. Her apparent refuge, DeepArcher, is no final answer to reach any blissful state, not even before it becomes overpopulated following the terrorist attacks. The emotional relief Maxine finds when she gets connected to DeepArcher is also of an addictive nature, and, as such, it brings back concerns of entropic mental stagnation.

Oedipa’s incessant activity to discriminate the true from the false till she finally refuses the binary trap has turned in *Bleeding Edge* into Maxine’s need to escape from the informational overload that suffocates our condition at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The free flow of useful information needs to be reestablished. Early in the narrative the protagonist had realized that, ironically, “Departure” “keeps being indefinitely postponed” (76), despite which she cannot stay out of the site. Even if she is not fully conscious of her stagnating addiction, “one day she happens to be back out in meatspace for a second, looks at the clock on the wall, does the math, figures three and a half hours she can’t account for” (426). And again, what she looks for in the site also relates to the dominant life/death binary, “the Internet has become a medium of communication between the worlds” (*BE* 427). Maxine insistently expects to find Windust in DeepArcher because she is paradoxically attracted to him, but she can find only his victim there, virtual Lester (428). Finally, escaping in time from the new addictive paradise of virtual reality—now become a site for commodified mourning and misappropriated trauma—the protagonist is able to come back to the realm of the physical and aim her Beretta at Ice’s head. She succeeds in her escape from the commodified web only because she is, in the terminology of trauma theory, a *resilient* hero capable of fighting back the entropic effects of both trauma and virtuality (cf. Cyrulnik). Although, as considered above, the limits between the categories of victim, perpetrator, and witnessing bystander are frequently problematized both in the context of psychic trauma and in Pynchon’s plot, in *Bleeding Edge* the author has chosen a type of detective protagonist not like Oedipa: finally, Maxine becomes assertive, rejects her literary predecessor’s uncertain (postmodern) condition, and shows no doubts or concerns when facing what the text describes as pure evil.

## **Conclusion: Escaping Commodified Trauma, Driving an Impala, and Returning to Springtime**

As foreseen in *The Crying of Lot 49*, by the beginning of the twenty-first century social energy overtly manifests as pure information. Contemporary men and women are trapped in and as information. Ensnared in “virtual” bodies, absorbed in information endeavors for unaccountable periods of time while surfing the web in computers, tablets, or cellular phones, the posthuman live a dangerous addiction that makes them (us) lose consciousness of their (our) surrounding physical reality. In *Bleeding Edge*, the narrator takes readers throughout a story that bounces from the physical into the virtual and back again, with misleading suggestions that the informational patterns that constitute our posthuman selves may find some happiness by leaving the meat behind, while the sinister They may be appropriating it all to perpetuate in the virtual world the emotional and ideological control they arguably exert in the physical one. The ways in which social energy negotiates the binary life/

death—manifested in the novel in different and never-resolved versions of events related (or not) to the 9/11 attacks—is again at the core of the Pynchonian universe: terrorism, in whichever guise, disrupts the normal flow of social energy, and, in addition, cyberspace induces the mental stagnation of its surfers by reifying their attempts to work through their traumatic condition. As the case was with the Lady V. in Pynchon's first novel, the contemporary manifestation of energy as pure information in a virtual world is ethically ambiguous and potentially dangerous. For the reader such manifestation is still opened to binary options; it may or may not be contained in a closed system, it may lead to freedom or to death, it may be the result of a paranoid mind or reflect the ultimate truth about life. Accordingly, in *Bleeding Edge* virtual space is represented as a new Limbo, between life and death; it may become a luring artificial paradise, hidden from the effects of entropy, or a place for mourning where reunions with the dead are still possible but its status is, to say the least, uncertain.

But this time, almost fifty years after *The Crying of Lot 49* left readers without any apparent conclusive ending, Pynchon seems to venture forth some assertive advice even if till the end his two protagonists have followed a similar questing pattern in their respective adventures. Oedipa had to travel up and down California in her quest for the meaning of America in the 1960s, and eventually she understood the need for social change, which left her and readers waiting for “the cry that might abolish the night” (*Lot 49* 81). Maxine also journeyed to cyberspace and back in her quest for the meaning of terrorism, truth, and being at the beginning of the millennium, but this time readers attend a brief (parodic?) manifestation of the hidden evil forces of history. It is when his protagonist comes back to meatspace to help March's daughter that Pynchon suggests the way to overcome structural trauma and its trap of commodified victimization. Maxine's resilient reaction at the time results from an ethical recognition of the human other, followed by an explicit confrontation with the face of evil. Escaping from her addictive search for answers to the terrorist attacks in the virtual territory of DeepArcher, she has a first revelation down below, in the physical subway, where the face of the Other summons her back to her humanity: “After a while Maxine has come to understand that the faces framed in these panels are precisely those out of all the city millions she must in the hour be paying most attention to [...] they are the day's messengers from whatever the Beyond has for a Third World” (439; cf. Levinas 82). And it is briefly after such exposure that she comes to confront Ice's “all red and swollen face” (473). At such a climactic moment her negative affects, invoked in the recognition of the demonic billionaire, bring forth her final reaction to put an end to her numbness and confront evil by aiming her gun at Ice's face (see Tomkins 204–42; cf. Sedgwick 1–34 and LaCapra 41–42).<sup>5</sup>

Following the exposure to the billionaire's evil face and her ethical although violent reaction, Maxine needs to restore her emotional balance with the protection provided by that other mechanic helper of Oedipa Mass, the Impala. As a messenger of motion, the bouncing car plays an affectionate and relevant role all along the protagonist's narrative; it stayed with Horst when they got separated, but he brought it back into their new life together. Going away and coming back—“one day out of nowhere Horst hands her the keys to the Impala” (417)—two pages before the end of the narrative the car becomes the physical site that Maxine needs to restore her human feelings and, thus, fight back her web-addicted entropic stagnation:

Maybe it's this Luxury Lounge interior—forty years down the road with the not-yet-damped vibrations of Midwest teen fantasies that've worked their way into the grain of the metallic turquoise vinyl, the loop-carpet floor mats, the ashtrays overflowing with ancient cigarette butts, some with lipstick shades not sold for years, each with a history of some romantic vigil, some high-speed pursuit, whatever Horst saw in this rolling museum of desire [...] now, presently, has wrapped them, brought them in from the unprofitable drill-fields of worry about the future, here inside, to repose, to un-furrowing, each eventually to her own dreams. (475)

The affective and solid quality of the bouncing car intratextually comes from Oedipa's 1960s adventure to bring the protagonist back to the beginning of the new annual cycle announced by the

blooming pear trees, an emotionally charged Pynchonian ending that, even if rooted in our entropic physical space, brings back a sense of life and regeneration after (commodified) trauma.

If Pynchon's second novel announced, among other things, the necessity to give visibility to the marginal groups of American society, *Bleeding Edge* confirms that the writer's fears from fifty years ago have come true. Although social stagnation was partly shaken by the bouncing 1960s, in Pynchon's analysis of the beginning of the twenty-first century people are trapped by new and sophisticated bleeding-edge technologies that, playing on the informational patterns that shape our beings, offer a false and enslaving refuge against the terrors of the physical world. *The Crying of Lot 49* ends with the same words of its title, in this way suggesting the inescapable trap created by human language and categorical reasoning. In *Bleeding Edge* the end invokes the necessity to bring back the affects that may dispel commodified trauma; it announces the beginning of another cycle of life in a new spring, with motherhood resonating as the most powerful everlasting pattern.<sup>6</sup> Even if she is late to take her children to school, as she did at the beginning of the story, Maxine still cares. Her children, exposed to physical entropic change, are now older, but, disengaged from addictive posthuman virtuality and able to stand the face of evil, the protagonist has regained her old capacity to feel. Dismissing posthuman commodified trauma, human energy is again unbound.

## Notes

1. *Neuromancer* explicitly addresses the notion that the body is nothing but a data system (see Fair 101), in this way ruling out entropy for those informational patterns that, according to Wiener, are the only thing that abides in the entity we used to call "human being."
2. In LaCapra's views, structural trauma results from the realization of the intrinsic mortality of the human condition. It may manifest before any specific traumatic event—existential angst—or may appear as the result of several traumatic situations. It is associated with frequent states of anxiety and melancholia, as well as with more specific symptoms characteristic of both personal and collective traumas, such as a feeling of absence, keeping silent, insomnia, or states of panic (76–85).
3. Pascual-Soler explicitly contends that "not only is pain not devoured with words, but words reinscribe past wounds preventing oblivion, deemed a necessary step in the route to recovery. In this sense, writing may become an act of self-injury." And she adds that reading narratives of pain "might trigger simulation and contagion" (209).
4. By quoting Vermeulen, Rothberg points out that the circulation of trauma risks "'strengthening *immunitary* tendencies that perpetuate rather than minimize trauma [...] especially in an age of globalization.' That is, when power operates biopolitically as the management of life, trauma talk in the centers of political sovereignty may activate concerns about security and contagion that lead to asymmetrical forms of violence rather than egalitarian, global solidarity. The post-9/11 United States is the most obvious example of such a phenomenon" (xiii).
5. In her analysis of *Against the Day*, Kathryn Hume contends that violence may have become a valid option for a Pynchon in ideological despair: "I too failed to register the seriousness with which Pynchon appears to support political violence because of my hostility to terrorism, but second and third readings persuade me that Pynchon is more aggressive here than in earlier novels, if only out of despair over lack of effective peaceful alternatives" (164).
6. "Ziggy surprising her with an unsolicited air kiss, 'See you later at pickup, OK?'  
'Give me a second, I'll be right with you.'  
'It's all right, Mom. We're good.'  
'I know you are, Zig, that's the trouble.' But she waits in the doorway as they go on down the hall. Neither looks back. She can watch them into the elevator at least" (*BE* 476–77).

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