CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Thomas Pynchon (b. 1937), the author of eleven highly imaginative and intellectually suggestive fictional works of the postwar period and recipient of Faulkner Award (1964), Rosenthal Memorial Award (1967), National Book Award (1974), and American Academy Howells Medal (1975), is chiefly known as the teller of “tales of the psychotic underground of modern imagination” (Vinson 1135). Pynchon’s emergence as a writer of fiction in the 1960s suggested a new movement in literature which was at variance with the realistic conventions of 1950s. Upon his first appearance, most critics grouped Pynchon with the so-called “Black Humorists”. This grouping has indeed some polemical points to it but his works are manifestations of his own unique vision. Drawing upon diversified elements of science fiction, fantasy, satire, myth, modern physics and advanced mathematics, Pynchon’s complex novels feature enormous casts of strange characters whose interrelated misadventures and parody signify the chaos and indeterminacy of modern civilization. The remarkably reclusive author of V. (1963), The Crying of Lot 49 (1966), Gravity’s Rainbow (1973), Vineland (1990), and Mason & Dixon (1997), has established his reputation as “the most important American novelist now writing” (Levine 178).
Critics like Tony Tanner agree that over the past forty years or so, “a decisive change has taken place in the spirit and character of contemporary writing” (6). Contemporary literature can be understood as a kind of reaction against the modernist literature represented by Eliot, Joyce, Yeats, Proust, and Hesse. Maureen Quilligan has expatiated on contemporary writers’ views on the use of metaphor and myth, which are at variance with those of the modernist writers:

Contemporary writers are skeptical of modernist notions of metaphor as a species of suprarational truth that unifies paradoxical opposites and modernist conceptions of myth, which make it a principle of order for art and of discipline for the subjective self. *(CETP 187)*

Postmodernist writers of fiction, poetry and drama have succeeded in perceiving and depicting contemporary experiences, doubts and uncertainties in a stylistically radical manner. Some indeed doubted the ability of literature to survive the experience of the holocaust. By the 1960s the confidence was greater, the sense of avant-grade returned, the talents multiplied, and there was a growing hunger to define the appropriate styles, tendencies and forms of a new time. And by the 1970s it was not hard to see a generation of writers remarkably pluralistic and innovative in outlook.

A.S.D. Pillai approaches postmodernism in literature as “a corpus of literature that has been written in the mid-fifties, sixties and after, largely in
America, and to a lesser extent in Latin America, Europe and Britain” (12). But Brian McHale treats it as an organized system of poetics, rather than a mere chronological division:

It announces that the referent here is not merely a chronological division but an organized system—a poetics, in fact—while at the same time properly identifying what exactly it is that postmodernism is post. Postmodernism is not post modern, whatever that might mean, but post modernism: it does not come after the present (a solecism), but after the modernist movement. Thus the term “postmodernism,” if we take it literally enough, à la lettre, signifies a poetics which is the successor of, or possibly a reaction against, the poetics of early twentieth-century modernism, and not some hypothetical writing of the future. (Postmodernist Fiction 5)

It is an era consequent to modernism yet different from it, having its own distinctive preoccupations and stylistic choices. The term has its limitations as well, because it does not precisely define the contemporary experiments. But it has now become an international literary phenomenon, which helps us to be better aware of our living in a distinct period. The critics McHale, Tanner and Pillai are unanimous in including Thomas Pynchon among the well-known American figures like Kurt Vonnegut Jr., John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Ken Kesey, Norman Mailer and John
Hawkes (McHale 21, Tanner 6, Pillai 12). The other pioneers of this movement are: the Argentinean Jorge Luis Borges, the Russian expatriate Vladimir Nabokov, the chief French practitioner Alain Robbe-Grillet, and the British writers Iris Murdoch, Doris Lessing, B.S. Johnson and John Fowles.

The postwar writers, who share the experiences like Nazi totalitarianism, the threat of total destruction by the atomic bomb, and the progressive devastation of the natural environment, cannot be optimistic. The traditional method of dividing literature into plot, character, structure, style, and the other elements does not suffice with their works because they use these elements in nontraditional ways. It is therefore an age of international creation, striking experiment, and some degree of aesthetic coherence. Many of their works blend literary genres, cultural and stylistic levels, the serious and the playful so that they resist classification according to traditional literary canons, and subvert the established foundations of thought and experience. Most often the works tend to depict the meaninglessness of existence and the underlying “void,” or “nothingness.”

Even if the postmodernist novelist undermines the foundations and accepted modes of thought and experience, he cannot do away with his art’s primary concern with life. As Hudson puts it, “the novel is concerned directly with life—with men and women, and their relationships, with the thoughts and feelings, the passions and motives by which they are governed
and impelled, with their joys and sorrows, their struggles, successes, failures” (163). The reality is that comparatively few of the American postmodernists truly divorce themselves from moral and social issues. However accomplished they might be as practitioners of the recent trend, the majority of them remain strangely moralistic in their outlook. David Cowart has noticed the social commitment in the works of a lot of leading postmodernist writers:

Heller in *Catch 22* (1961) has some perfectly serious things to say about war. Neither Doctorow in *The Book of Daniel* (1971) nor Coover in the *Public Burning* (1977) is indifferent to the real-life anguish of the Rosenbergs. Vonnegut, in novel after novel, quite passionately deplores violence, racism, and economic exploitation. Even Nabokov, ... never misses an opportunity to revile totalitarianism and brutality in both their imaginary and real life forms. (PS 4)

Though Pynchon is apparently a reclusive author, he is not separated from his fellow men in spirit. Invariably in all his fictional works Pynchon’s serious social concern is discernible. In fact he undertakes a “paradoxical subversion of the postmodern gospel” (PS 4). His attitude toward genocidal violence, racism, oppressive economic practices, misuse of scientific information, colonial oppression, moral degeneration etc. is exposed in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. He has articulated in various ways, his profound
empathy with what he calls the preterite, the left out, the poor, the defeated, the criminal, and the passed over in every form of election (spiritual, economic, racial, cultural). Readers can identify his contempt for the complacently elect, represented by the privileged class in the American society. “Pynchon uses Puritan themes as a contrast to the uncertainty in contemporary society even though he himself is critical of a tradition that presupposes the elect and the preterite” (Safer 159). Art for him is a means of provoking the thoughts of the greatest number of people by offering them a startlingly crude and deeply coloured picture of common joys and sorrows. Pynchon is often studied as a postmodern exemplar, and his vision of life as depicted in his novels appears as “an amorphous postmodern disillusionment or some sort of dark pessimism or even disappointed humanism” (Varsava 63). His books are made coherent in unusual ways. He repeatedly baffles and occasionally impresses his readers as belonging to that rare category of literary artists who are haunted by the terminology and principles of science and technology. His mastery of science, and his frequent shifts into its language tend to astonish them rather strangely.

In the fall of 1953 Pynchon entered Cornell University as a scholarship student in the recently established engineering physics programme. While an undergraduate at Cornell, he was especially fascinated by the contributions of James Clerk Maxwell, Willard Gibbs, Rudolf Clausius, Hermann Helmholtz, Kekule von Stradonitz, Max Planck,
and Werner Heisenberg to science. Although Pynchon remained only one year in this programme, whose mission was “a response to the expanding technological activities in the country” (www. pynchon), he maintained a voracious appetite for the complexities of quantum mechanics, the laws of thermodynamics, and the “Uncertainty Principle”. He also kept up his interest particularly in the human use and abuse to which science is put. Frank D. McConnell finds in Pynchon’s novels, a literary application of the principle of uncertainty in the presentation of modern life as “a city honeycombed with secret labyrinthine subterranean passages” (Contemporary Novelists 1136). In the darkness, multiplicity, and extensiveness of the passages one becomes disheartened. In Pynchon’s oeuvre uncertainty is a condition of human experience in the world.

It is interesting to note that in 1957, when Pynchon returned to the Cornell University, to complete his degree in English, Vladimir Nabokov was professor of literature there. (Pynchon had left engineering physics for arts and sciences and then dropped out of Cornell in 1954 for a two-year tour of duty in the U.S. Navy). Obviously, Nabokov could have served as a mentor and role model for Pynchon during his formative years at Cornell. Although by the time of Pynchon’s graduation Nabokov had published Lolita and many other books, most of the students remained oblivious to their teacher’s eminence and knew him chiefly as “the eccentric monarch of a course in modern literature” (Stark 2). How much direct contact Pynchon
had with Nabokov is uncertain. Yet Pynchon's fictional project does have affinities with Nabokov's, not least a love of literary playfulness in naming characters. Gale Group's website on Pynchon gives the following information: "Pynchon received an excellent introduction to classic writers of fiction and witnessed Nabokov's meticulous attention to the formal details of narrative construction" (www.pynchon). While at Cornell, novelistic enthusiasm was bubbling in his mind and he wrote a few stories that were later published.

Pynchon graduated from Cornell in 1958. Characteristically at this time his interests encompassed both literature and science. Then he moved toward the literary pole of his interests, declining a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship for higher studies in science. Next, he reversed directions and obtained a job with Boeing. The technical information he got in this way was later used in Gravity's Rainbow. His career turned again when he went to Mexico to finish V., which received considerable acclaim. From then on he prefers to live by his pen remaining unnoticed and rarely available.

At least a brief survey of Pynchon's early short stories would be helpful in tracing the development of the author's vision. His short stories, in fact, epitomize his vision, which appears on magnified canvases in his novels. His first short story, "The Small Rain" was published in the Cornell Writer of March 1959. The major figure is Nathan Levine, who was enlisted in the army. He is stationed at Fort Roach, a desolate place in Louisiana,
which he actually likes. He appears as an orderly “leaning drowsy against the wall, smoking, and an inert figure in fatigues lying on a bunk, reading a paperback” (SL 27). He likes the inertia, the inaction, the repetition, and the lack of necessity to think and feel. Levine is also, paradoxically enough, a graduate and communications expert. This cherished immunity from feeling is to be a dominant and recurring phenomenon in Pynchon’s later works. One can find in Levine the fictional predecessor to Pynchon’s Benny Profane (V.) and Lt. Tyrone Slothrop (GR).

However, Levine’s unit is suddenly ordered into action when a hurricane devastates the bayou country of southern Louisiana. “The hurricane had annihilated a small village called Creole…” (SL 36). … The army had taken over McNeese State College, on the outskirts of the city, for a base of operations. The calamity stirs Levine into some kind of action and change. Two things provoke this emergence into wakefulness and activity: the disaster, and the hundreds of decaying corpses that have to be dragged ashore from the water. There is perpetual rain and the air is full of the smell of death. Levine begins to experience the disgust and the reality of it. He gets a vision of life and death in terms of electronics:

What I mean is something like a closed circuit. Everybody on the same frequency. And after a while you forget about the rest of the spectrum and start believing that this is the only frequency that counts or is real. While outside, all up and down
the land, there are these wonderful colors and x-rays and ultraviolet going on. (SL 42)

In Pynchon’s later fiction, one can note that too many characters try to protract life as “a closed circuit” in some way or another, so that they can “forget about the rest.” Levine joins the team picking up the dead bodies, involving himself in some kind of social work. There are evidently noticeable types, themes, even atmospheres which Pynchon will develop in subsequent works. Soon afterwards Levine had a momentary, ludicrous vision of himself, which would presage Benny’s yo-yoing and Slothrop’s wanderings:

Lardass Levine the Wandering Jew, debating on weekday evenings in strange and nameless towns with other Wandering Jews the essential problems of identity—not of the self so much as an identity of place and what right you really had to be any place. (SL 49)

Towards the end Levine picks up a coed who calls herself “little Buttercup.” For a night in a cabin in a nearby swamp, she was, indeed, his “swamp wench,” as his attitude towards women had been formed to be pornographic from his regular reading of the pornographic novel, Swamp Wench. There is no love in their coupling. Levine’s sex act with Buttercup evokes Eliot’s description of loveless sex acts in The Waste Land. Finally, Levine says “In the midst of great death, the little death” (SL 50). It points
to the fact that the act of love, which should have been an act of life, has been turned into an act of death. This degeneration of sex into death—or the substitution of death for love—is one of the modern malaises to which Pynchon returns and which he analyses in his longer fictional works. When Levine leaves the area, it is still raining, and a friend tells him, “Jesus Christ I hate rain”. And Rizzo, another friend, answers, “You and Hemingway. Funny, ain’t it. T. S. Eliot likes rain” (SL 51). Tony Tanner interprets this passage as a rejection of Eliot’s values or poetic stance, though Levine is no Hemingway (25).

Pynchon’s next story “Mortality and Mercy in Vienna,” was published in Epoch, in Spring 1959. The title of the story comes from Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure (I. i. 45). The theme of self-removal and substitution of authority is central to Pynchon’s story, in which the city of Washington is depicted as being denigrate and corrupt as the Vienna in Shakespeare’s play. It gives a detailed account of a party in Washington. As usual in Pynchon’s works, the party lapses into violence and chaos, and in the end Irving Loon, a strange Indian from Ontario, starts to massacre all the guests prior to eating them. The idea of the story might seem to be just a piece of cruel joke. But into this remarkable story Pynchon has packed a number of very suggestive notions and it foreshadows the thematic concern of the later novels. Some of Pynchon’s major themes: chaos, disintegration, massacre, paranoia and
sadism emerge here. Pynchon’s later characters Foppl (V.) and Blicero (GR) surpass Irving Loon in their sadistic behaviour.

Another story “Low-lands” followed in 1960. The story opens with the lawyer Dennis Flange’s decision not to go to work one afternoon, so that he can drink with the garbage man, Rocco Squarcione. Pig Bodine, a vulgar figure and old navy friend of Flange, joins them. (Pig Bodine recurs in later works V. and Gravity’s Rainbow). This is too much for Flange’s wife Cindy and she orders them all out of the house (SL 61). Rocco takes the others in his truck to a large garbage dump and introduces them to Bolingbroke, the watchman of the dump. “Flange got the feeling that this dump was like an island or enclave in the dreary country around it, a discrete kingdom with Bolingbroke its uncontested ruler” (SL 67). He accommodates them all in his hut for the night. Flange is awakened by a call from a gypsy girl named Nerissa (SL 74). She leads him by a secret tunnel to her underground room.

As the story progresses, Flange moves away from his wife, and further away from established society. He first goes to the company of nonconformists and social derelicts, and then to the gypsies who are completely ostracized from society. They are “rubbish” “in social terms, and only able to live by night. Pynchon, later in his novels, presents communities and individuals socially ostracized. Waste, rubbish, garbage,
dump, sewers, secret passages, and subterranean tunnels are terms recurring in his novels to depict the entropic drift and social ostracism.

Pynchon’s next story “Entropy” was first published in the Kenyon Review in Spring 1960. The themes of this story are discussed in Chapter II of this dissertation.

The story “Under the Rose” was first published in Noble Savage, in 1961. Pynchon later reworked the story as chapter 3 in V.. The story is based on the Fashoda Crisis of 1898. It reveals for the first time Pynchon’s ability to reconstruct history for his own purposes. His reconstructive gift emerges fully in Gravity’s Rainbow. This was the climax of a series of conflicts between Great Britain and France, and although it resulted in the truce of 1904, it revealed the possible dangers of the international conflicts always latent in the period of late imperialism. And it could be seen, retrospectively, as an omen of the First World War. Fashoda was the strategic centre of the Egyptian Sudan, the land of the Upper Nile. Both the British under Kitchener and the French under Marchand engaged in a race to capture it (SL 106). National feelings ran so high that it did indeed bring the countries to the brink of war.

Pynchon’s story is concerned with the spying that went on in the background, and the desire of the warmongers for war and destruction, which he implicitly condemns. Moldweorp, a German spy, longs for a big, final war: “All he asked was that eventually there be a war. Not just a small
incidental skirmish in the race to carve up Africa, but one pip-pip, jolly-ho, up-goes the balloon Armageddon for Europe” (SL 107). But Pynchon presents a counterpart to Moldweorp in Porpentine, the English spy, who has “conceived the private mission of keeping off Armageddon” (SL 107). And Porpentine is another of those Pynchon figures concerned with the problems of being a ‘saviour’:

Porpentine found it necessary to believe if one appointed oneself savior of humanity that perhaps one must love that humanity only in the abstract. For any descent to the personal level can make a purpose less pure. Whereas a disgust at individual human perversity might as easily avalanche into a rage for apocalypse. (SL 118)

In this short story Pynchon introduces Victoria, a convent educated young girl, who establishes trysts with the spies. Later in V., she appears as the mystery figure. All the spies operate “in no conceivable Europe but rather in a zone forsaken by God, between the tropics of diplomacy, lines they were forbidden forever to cross” (SL 113). A similar God- forsaken zone reappears in Gravity’s Rainbow.

Another short story by Pynchon, “The Secret Integration” was published in The Saturday Evening Post, in December 1964, i.e., after writing the novel V.. The story deals with the childish adventure games of a group of boys led by Grover Snodd. Tim, Étienne, and Hogan are his
friends. Carl Barrington, a Negro boy, is the last to join them. They indulge in various attempts at sabotaging, for example, the school PTA meetings or dropping water balloons on cars (SL 187). Their secret undertaking is code named Operation Spartacus (SL 155). Most of their ‘plots’ fail when the authoritarian adults interfere. The title refers to the events that follow the moving of a black family, the Barringtons, into Northumberland Estates (SL 186). The white boys note that their parents are all scared of the black people. In fact the white adults are racially prejudiced and they behave hysterically in the presence of the black family. The only parent who keeps out of it is Étienne’s father. He asks, “Why don’t people stop worrying about Negroes and start worrying about automation” (SL 188). To show their hatred towards the black family the white adults cover the front lawn of the Barrington house with stinking garbage. “The garbage was shin-deep all over the lawn, neatly spread right up to the property line” (SL 190). When the gang of boys discovers this, they begin kicking through it looking for clues. And Tim realizes that the garbage has been brought from his own house, as he finds crumpled envelopes addressed to his father and mother. The gang of boys continues cleaning the yard until Mrs. Barrington stops them. Through shame or feeling of helplessness they effectively abandon Carl, and he drifts away into the darkness, off to the old dilapidated shelter. Carl is in every sense a reject, and has been constructed out of rejections:
Carl had been put together out of phrases, images, possibilities that grownups had somehow turned away from, repudiated, left at the edges of the town, as if they were auto parts in Etienne’s father’s junkyard – things they could or did not want to live with but which the kids, on the other hand, could spend endless hours with, piecing together, rearranging, feeding programming, refining. He was entirely theirs, their friend or robot, to cherish, buy undrunk sodas for, or send into danger or even, as now, at last, to banish from their sight. (SL 192)

Another incident involves another black, a vagrant and a drifter named Mr. McAfee. The children try to help him. Incidentally, Hogan Slothrop, one of the children, is already a member of Alcoholics Anonymous (166). The title of the story refers to the white boys’ secret but futile attempts to “integrate” with the black community by helping and working with them. Junkyards, wastelands, and heaps of garbage are recurring images in Pynchon’s fiction in keeping with his entropic vision. Quite often his protagonists search for clues in heaps of garbage like the “young gangsters.” The story anticipates the theme of racism, which Pynchon develops in Gravity’s Rainbow and treats exhaustively in Mason & Dixon. The boys show some radical resentment against “the scaled-up world” the adults made and lived. The revolutionary spirit of the young boys against racial discrimination flares up later in Pynchon’s astronomers Mason and Dixon.
In addition to Pynchon's short fiction, his essay, "A Journey into the Mind of Watts" published in New York Times Magazine in June 1966, is also worth noting in order to grasp the author's concerns. It is a study of Los Angeles slums where the riots took place. Los Angeles enjoys media fame and glitter, but within its heart there is spiritual emptiness and degeneration. Pynchon describes Los Angeles as 'a little unreal', evoking both Baudelaire's Paris and Eliot's London. Probably, Pynchon was drawn to the Watts Towers, some towers made literally out of garbage by an Italian immigrant, Simon Rodia. The people who live in Watts are the disinherited for whom Pynchon has a particular sympathy. He comments on their actual poverty and emptiness of lives, describing how violence is inevitable in such circumstances.

Novel remains the chief literary mode in American literature that depicts the indeterminacy, complexity and multiplicity of postmodern experience. And Pynchon's novels, as George Levine claims, "challenge fundamental, usually unspoken literary and cultural assumptions" (179). His fictional locales extend over three continents namely, Europe, America and Africa, where he presents humanity that is injured to an unspeakable extent. The image of the sewer, of the underground labyrinth, the secret network, the hidden plot all this is central to all his gargantuan novels. They are remarkably filled with allegorical characters, emblematic black humour, and encyclopaedic appropriation of western history and popular culture. The
principal characters are invariably questers, who resemble somnambulists inhabiting ghost stories. Most often they illustrate the perilous tension between modern technology, political causes, and individual autonomy. Each novel centres on a quest for knowledge, and has a plot with national, global, or even cosmic implications. Yet no one completes the search; “each protagonist falls short of revelation because of some spiritual weakness, some reluctance to risk and give of the self, some incapacity to love” (Cooper 104). Certain grotesque or at least inept characters play out their roles in a fantastic or nightmarish modern world in which the events are often simultaneously comic and horrifying.

Pynchon’s primary purpose, from the early story “Entropy” to *Mason & Dixon*, as Thomas H. Schaub notes, “has been to dramatize the twentieth-century extremism with its loss of temperate balance” (*PVA* ix). His depiction of uncertainties and ambiguities is deliberate. The origin of this view lies in the erosion of nineteenth-century optimism and the developments in science and politics in the twentieth-century during and after the World Wars. Pynchon’s books, accordingly, establish for the reader a strict uncertainty, which is intentional.

Further, to illustrate uncertainty, and to maintain the pessimistic sense of ominous doom, Pynchon uses as a metaphor the concept of entropy derived from the second law of thermodynamics. He was in fact influenced by Norbert Wiener who held that the “universe was running downhill”
(HUHB 58). The social and political aspects of this disorder were first dramatically proposed by Henry Adams in his autobiography. Written in 1905, the autobiography shows a stylistic self-consciousness that characterizes a modernist posture. The concept appears in Pynchon's early short stories: "Entropy", "Low lands", and "Under the Rose" and later in his novels. However, literary treatment of this subject does not begin with Pynchon. David Cowart has traced the history of the literary application of the principle of entropy:

It has long been a staple of science fiction, from H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* (1895) to Isaac Asimov’s “The Last Question” (1956) and less seriously, George Alec Effinger’s *What Entropy Means to Me* (1972). Even Flaubert earlier in the nineteenth century, saw literary possibilities of entropy. *(The Art of Allusion 2)*

Pynchon differs from these writers in that he is less interested in the running down of the world or the universe than in the running down of the civilization into which he was born. He uses entropy as a paradigm of the growing decadence of the western culture. And his application of the concept shows that he is more concerned with the ways in which characters respond to the threat of decline than with the fact of decline itself. But unlike some of his characters and certain of his critics, Pynchon recognizes that the concept of entropy can be applied to society only by analogy, and
that consequently, no law says that a society’s decline must be irreversible. Indeed civilizations do not decline perpetually, but rather wax and wane. The second chapter of this dissertation examines specifically Pynchon’s use of the principle of entropy in his novels as a metaphor for cultural decline.

One of the reasons for the complexity and obscurity of Pynchon’s novels is his unusual incorporation of scientific information in his fictional world. Kathryn Hume justifies Pynchon’s use of science and technology in his postmodernist fictions: “Pynchon’s presentation of humanity insists on science and technology as an inescapable factor, as something that cannot merely be ignored or deplored, as usually happens in humanist visions” (247). In addition to technology, he insists on another ignored feature of reality, namely, its multiplicity. An interest in Pynchon’s fiction may encourage readers to study those subjects that they thought themselves indifferent or hostile to. But the notion that one can “understand” Pynchon by studying thermodynamics, aromatic polymers, quantum mechanics, principles of rocketry, or any of the other subjects connected with his fiction, is defective. Perhaps the absence of specialized knowledge excludes “full understanding” of a novel. As David Cowart suggests, “our ultimate appreciation of such a novel derives from much more than an acquaintance with or expertise in whatever craft, technology, of science the author may take as an aspect of his subject matter or setting” (The Art of Allusion 2).
Similarly, one reads Pynchon or any other author not to understand the bleak cosmic concepts like entropy, but rather for aesthetic experience and to know the human response to such truths. Scientific information functions impressively as an ordering principle and explains precisely the world around us. Pynchon, then, as Stark opines, “is not a frustrated scientist merely leaving shards of scientific information scattered around in his novels” (73). He achieves an unusual synthesis of art and science, and develops the unique character of his ambitious works.

Though generally he uses scientific information to depict the drift towards doom, paradoxically, he places elements of hope too. For example, his short story “Entropy” begins with a quotation from Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer*, often cited as evidence to his dark vision:

There will be more calamities, more death, more despair. Not the slightest indication of a change anywhere... We must get into step, a lockstep toward the prison of death. There is no escape. The weather will not change. *SL 81*

But soon afterwards, one can note Callisto, the protagonist of Pynchon’s story, hopefully involved in making "a tiny enclave of regularity" (83). The fact of decline and eventual death is hardly arguable, but human response to this issue is the key to Pynchon’s writing.

Though Pynchon is a writer of the postwar period, critics like Charles B. Harris, Robert A. Hipkiss and Elaine B. Safer call Pynchon a novelist of
the absurd and black humour. Of course, the absurdist writing is not a postwar phenomenon in origin. Alfred Jarry’s French play *Ubu the King* had manifested the mood and technique of absurdity as early as 1896. European literary movements like *expressionism* and *surrealism* paved the way for the emergence of the literature of the absurd. In the 1920s, Franz Kafka’s novels, *The Trial* and *Metamorphosis* are exemplary works in this direction. The contemporary movement, however, evolved after the terrifying experiences of World War II, as a revolt against the essential beliefs and values both of traditional culture and traditional literature. The absurdists develop the notion that the human condition is essentially and indelibly absurd, and that this condition can be adequately represented only in works of literature that are themselves absurd. Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1955), a grotesquely comical, irrational and nonconsequential play, is a typical example for the absurd mode of writing. Existentialist philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre believe that human life itself is absurd, as man is an alien being in a universe that lacks any logical order, inherent truth, value, or meaning. But the absurdist writers’ perspectives to life have been influenced by diametrically opposing approaches of diverse schools of existentialism. The absurdist vision, as Camus asserts, grows out of man’s desire to find meaning in an unreasonable universe. The absurd, explains Camus, is “that divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints, my nostalgia for unity, this fragmented universe, and the
contradiction that binds them together" (The Myth of Sisyphus 37). Those who exclude either the nostalgia for unity or the fragmented universe are suppressing the absurd by denying one of the terms of its equation.

In American literature the idea of the absurd made its appearance with the publication of Mark Twain’s The Mysterious Stranger (1916), in which the self is described as a “vagrant thought, a homeless thought, wandering forlorn among the empty eternities” (quoted in Hipkiss 2). The existentialists such as Ernest Hemingway and Wallace Stevens who follow Twain, maintain a positive attitude to life. Though they think that life is cosmically absurd, man can struggle against absurdity, by living intensely, by being true to his own moral code, and by fulfilling the demands of his chosen profession. Even if there is no life after death, these writers take comfort in the belief that nature will endure and that their lives and works are, if done with personal integrity, a meaningful contribution to the life of their era. They have highlighted the idea that human beings are fairly rational creatures who live in a partially intelligible universe, that they are part of an ordered social structure, and that they may be capable of heroism and dignity even in defeat.

Robert A. Hipkiss argues, “the absurd is at base a very serious view of life. It is a view of man as a being who must strive to attain goals that provide only temporary satisfaction and that have no meaning beyond themselves” (2). Like Sisyphus, the legendary king of Corinth in ancient
Greece, man is condemned to roll a stone uphill, only to have it roll back down again, and to have to return to the foot of the hill to roll it back up once more.

The powerful impact of novels of the absurd, ranging from Melville’s *The Confidence Man* to novels of the 1960s and the 70s illustrates the fact that man cannot divest himself of the desire for a traditional sense of clarity and meaning. Novelists of black humour and the absurd have an enthusiastic audience in our post World War II society because people continue to want unifying principles in a confused world.

Unlike the apparently serious writers, the black humorists have an altogether different approach to serious issues of life. They are good at exposing the moral abscesses and the degeneration of the world. But they laugh aloud or provoke laughter before such painful concerns. Robert Alter criticizes writers of the absurd and black humour like Thomas Pynchon and John Barth for appearing to show a tough-minded honesty and a desire to look squarely in the face, when in fact they use laughter to accustom themselves to painful realities. Alter feels that the black humorists’ avoidance of seriousness diverts them from their responsibility to face crucial moral issues:

The sharp-edged laughter gives the appearance of cutting to the core of our culture’s moral abscesses and so communicates a sense of pain inflicted to work a cure. At the same time, the
picaresque exuberance of the comedy offers a welcome release for our deepest feelings of anxiety about the mad state of things in which we live. (60)

But actually, it seems that Pynchon wishes to cause the reader to participate in a serious exploration of the irrationality of the post World War II society. He is motivated by a frustrated desire to experience a sense of unity and order, and underlying his laughter is a nostalgia for the clarity and consistency of the past, a nostalgia for "a lost home or the hope of a promised land" (The Myth of Sisyphus 5). The longing is not sentimental but rather an ardent yearning for shaping principles in a world that seems irrational. The black humourists depict horrifying details of a disintegrating world and uncover laughter in life in order to shock and provoke the reader for a while. They evoke the need to appeal to values of the past by showing the emptiness and the lack of purpose in contemporary life. Sharing the postwar predicament, Pynchon, a committed artist, who, as Camus puts it, is terrifically aware of his obligation as a writer of the present era. Camus has, in his "Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech," given an eloquent expression of the writer's duty towards the society:

Each generation doubtless feels called upon to reform the world. Mine knows that it will not reform it, but its task is perhaps even greater. It consists in preventing the world from destroying itself. Heir to a corrupt history, in which are mingled
fallen revolutions, technology gone mad, dead gods, and worn-out ideologies, where mediocre powers can destroy all, yet no longer know how to convince, where intelligence has debased itself to become the servant of hatred and oppression, this generation starting from its own negations has had to re-establish, both within and without, a little of that which constitutes the dignity of life and death. In a world threatened by disintegration, in which our grand inquisitors run the risk of establishing for ever the kingdom of death, it knows that it should, in an insane race against the clock, restore among the nations a peace that is not servitude, reconcile anew labour and culture, and remake for all men the Ark of the Covenant. (56)

It can be noted that Pynchon's fictional works curiously incorporate Camus’ ideas on the artist's commitment. As Edward Mendelson observes, “his seriousness, that is, his responsible attention to the world outside his books, is not always evident on first reading” (PCCE 3). It is implicit that he is not able to reform the world. But through his major fictional works he depicts the “corrupt history” (V., GR, & M&D), “fallen revolutions” (V., & GR) “technology gone mad” (GR), “dead gods” (V., Lot 49 & GR) “worn out ideologies” (Vineland), “destruction at various levels” (V., & GR) “intelligence serving hatred and oppression” (GR), “threat of disintegration” (V., & GR), establishment of the “kingdom of death” (GR), along with the
attempts to abolish "servitude" \((M&d)\), and to establish peace and to "renew culture" \((M&D)\).

Also in Jean Paul Sartre’s perspective, writing itself is a powerful act capable of changing the world by revealing. The committed artist reveals only with the intention of effecting the desirable change:

The prose-writer is a man who has chosen a certain method of secondary action which we call action by disclosure. It is therefore permissible to ask him this second question: ‘What aspect of the world do you want to disclose? What change do you want to bring into the world by this disclosure? The ‘committed’ writer knows that words are action. He knows that to reveal is to change and that one can reveal only by planning to change. He has given up the impossible dream of giving an impartial picture of Society and the human condition. \(\textit{What is Literature?} 14\)

As an artist born before the beginning of the Second World War, sharing an “insane history” and “convulsions of time” \((NPAS 54)\), and brought up in a world threatened by nuclear destruction, Pynchon cannot but be pessimistic like all the men of his generation. Indeed, a pervading sense of pessimism is palpable in Pynchon’s fictional world. Despite being a man of deep and dark imagination, Pynchon is not all darkness but a writer who sets himself against darkness. Beyond his portrayal of the chaos, there is a
strong desire for unity. He juxtaposes elements of hope in a world of despair by presenting principles, agents and situations that resist entropy. Elaine B. Safer stresses Pynchon’s desire for a moral order in a disintegrating universe: “Pynchon develops a nostalgia for unity, for a commonly accepted set of values—such as existed in great Renaissance works like King James Bible and the epic…” (CETP 157).

When Pynchon uses history as a raw material for his fiction, “he cannot put himself today in the service of those who make history; he is at the service of those who suffer it” (VPAS 53). He is the great writer of the overlooked, the left out, the oppressed, the victimized, the rejected, and thus offers a challenge to our often unexamined assumptions about the valuable and the valueless, the estimable and the dismissible. Like any great writer, he makes us re-examine the dominant valuations of our age. He deliberately empathizes with those whom the society discards as rubbish or waste. Wanderers, slaves, schlemihls, social derelicts, moral dwarfs and spiritual bankrupts roam about his fictional world.

Again, Pynchon’s New England Puritan lineage, which is intimately connected to the social history of the nation, urges his social commitment. William Pynchon, a judge at the Salem witchcraft trials in 1692 and a character in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s House of Seven Gables, was his illustrious ancestor. Pynchon seeks the assurance of spiritual regeneration in a world in which there is far more evidence of damnation. In this regard
he seems to abide by the New England tradition set by writers like Jonathan Edwards, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Adams, Robert Lowell and T.S. Eliot.

Just as Eliot shows in *The Waste Land* that the mythical waste land as well as the modern waste land evolved out of man’s spiritual degeneration, Pynchon too gives the idea that the debris of war, inanimate human beings, the junk yard, sewers and garbage heaps of modern culture are products of man’s inner degeneration. The world, which has lost its light—its transcendence, is not a past history. It is here and now. The spiritual lethargy of the waste landers and their dread of regeneration resemble the entropic drift of men of the post war era. Just as Eliot proposes a conditional escape from the degenerate state of affairs by choosing to act according to the dictates of the ancient *Upanishads*, Pynchon also presents at least a few examples of liberating human actions. It is as though man can hope and live in a future, which is not yet ready. Hope should be actualised in life, if it is to acquire any meaning.

In response to his work’s richness, critical attention has in due course been paid to myriad of topics he has examined. But one significant aspect, however, has not been adequately addressed in Pynchonian scholarship. No sustained effort has been made to read Pynchon’s novels as embodying a determinate cultural stance or moral vision of optimism in spite of the depiction of the general tendency of decline. Pynchon’s vision does not
limit itself to the meaninglessness and indeterminacy of the world. Though he presents a world where the tendency towards disorder dominates, the value system gets inverted, and people confront meaninglessness, he doesn’t uphold those experiences as expressions of his vision.

Drawing upon various textual evidences and critical opinions, this thesis explores Pynchon's depiction of the contemporary predicament with a view to outlining his fragmented vision of life and major concerns. Indeed it is extremely difficult to decipher a coherent vision of life in his novels as he deliberately flouts consistency and resists reading. The concept of "entropic decline" being the major thread of thought that extends throughout his fictional works, the thesis as whole examines the various forms of its manifestation in western culture. Chapter two attempts to trace the phenomenon of "entropy" i.e., the principle of cosmic degeneration and decline as the chief metaphoric weft of all the five novels of Pynchon. Chapter three approaches the psychic perversions and the moral decline of the western world as manifestations of "the entropic drift," with special reference to V., and chapter four elucidates the socio-ethical degeneration as treated in The Crying of Lot 49, in the background of California. Chapter five analyses the manifold forms of cultural decline in the context of war as depicted in Gravity's Rainbow. Chapter six deals with the major themes of Vineland and Mason & Dixon namely, slavery and the wreck of the modern family, as clear expressions of cultural erosion. And chapter seven is the
conclusion, which weaves together and sums up the themes of the previous chapters.

1 Critics like Frank D. McConnell and Elaine B. Safer classify Pynchon as a Black Humorist. Safer's essay "The Allusive mode and Black Humor in Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow" offers an exhaustive treatment of Pynchon as a black humorist.

2 In seventeenth century Puritan terminology the preterite are those passed over by God in his primal scheme (seed 179).

3 William Pynchon wrote a theological tract entitled "The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption" (1650), to refute the orthodox Puritan theological views regarding Christ's suffering (Safer 159).