CHAPTER II

ENTROPY AS CULTURAL DECADENCE

A brief survey of Pynchon’s works will reveal that the author has generally a bleak outlook towards the world and the quotidian. In his introduction to the collection of short stories entitled Slow Learner, he dwells upon the various themes and influences he has come across as a writer. He frankly admits his indebtedness to Henry Adams’ The Education of Henry Adams and Norbert Wiener’s The Human Use of Human Beings and Cybernetics. The theme of his story “Entropy” is mostly “derivative of what these two men have to say” (SL 13). Though he calls it an erroneous practice to begin with a theme, symbol or some other abstract unifying agent, and then try to force characters and events to conform to it, most often he follows that pattern. He calls the story “Entropy” as “a fine example of procedural error” (12). Pynchon even makes a deceptive statement that people would think that he knows more about the subject of entropy than he really does. Then he elaborates on the theme of entropy thus:

Well, according to OED the word was coined in 1865 by Rudolf Clausius, on the model of the word “energy,” which he took to be Greek for “work-contents.” Entropy, or “transformation-contents” was introduced as a way of
examining the changes a heat engine went through in a typical cycle, the transformation being heat into work. [...] As it was, after having been worked with in a restrained way for the next 70 or 80 years, entropy got picked up on by some communication theorists and given the cosmic moral twist it continues to enjoy in current usage. [...] Adam's sense of power out of control, coupled with Wiener's spectacle of universal heat-death and mathematical stillness, seemed just the ticket. (SL 12-13)

The introduction reveals also his deep acquaintance with the science of thermodynamics, especially in relation to the findings of scientists like Clerk Maxwell, P.G. Tait, Isaac Asimov and Willard Gibbs. The reader can experience a pervading sense of "thermodynamical gloom" cast over Pynchon's fictional world (SL 14). Pynchon's incorporation of scientific and technological information in his books is a major reason for their difficulty. But one can see how Pynchon adopts scientific information for presenting his own peculiar vision through his fiction. For example, his frequent references to the second law of thermodynamics, often called "the principle of entropy," is meant to represent the world as a closed system undergoing gradual degeneration. The degeneration he highlights, of course, has various realms like spiritual, psychological and socio-cultural apart from thermodynamic. So, in his novels, the concept of entropy is
used more as a metaphor than as a means to display his knowledge. Scientific laws help to present ideas systematically and coherently. As Stephen Toulmin shows, they “express the form of a regularity rather than merely expressing a piece of data” (86).

The phenomenon of entropy, as explained in the Second Law of Thermodynamics, shows that “a closed system will always lose energy because its heat will be dissipated” (Stark 51). In other words, entropy refers to the gradual levelling of energy in the universe. In any isolated system, whether that system be a steam engine or a man, a galaxy or a culture, entropy, in keeping with the second law of thermodynamics, tends to increase. As entropy increases, the system draws closer to chaos, its most probable state. The apparent implication of this law is that everything is running down. Even before Pynchon’s interesting application of the concept of entropy as the weft of his novels, scientists themselves have thought about the relevance of the theory to areas other than thermodynamics. Broadening the implication of this concept, Norbert Wiener states:

As entropy increases, the universe, and all closed systems in the universe, tend naturally to deteriorate and lose their distinctiveness, to move from the least to the most probable state, from a state of chaos and sameness. (HUHB 20)
Here Wiener illustrates the widespread application of a theory that originally described only transfer of heat, to entirely different systems. Entropy thus serves as an extensively significant metaphor that denotes chaos, deterioration and death. Pynchon chooses death as one of his major themes. The death that interests him, however, extends beyond the physical death of human beings. In Charles B Harris’s view, “Pynchon’s concern is with cosmic decay, the running down of time, ... the death, in short, of the universe” (78). His preoccupation with such large-scale disintegration represents the peculiarly modern phenomenon. He employs the concept of entropic decay by depicting the progressive spreading of chaos, by showing some of his characters’ increasing disassembly, and by analyzing the degenerating tendencies of the society.

Pynchon uses the concept of entropy first in his short story titled “Entropy” (1958). Metaphorically applying the concept of entropy, and overtly referring to Henry Adams, the story deals with the theme of sociocultural decadence. The techniques and themes of Pynchon’s novels appear in much simpler form in this story. The action of the story occurs within two distinct apartments, one above the other. Downstairs one Meatball Mulligan is holding a ‘lease-breaking party’, which seems to be degenerating into chaos. Upstairs a figure named Callisto, a student of thermodynamics, is obsessed with the vision of “ultimate cosmic heat-death” (SL 87). He sees proof all around him of an encroaching chaos and
reacts in strange ways, such as keeping constant the temperature of his living quarters. He believes that entropy will destroy all isolated systems like galaxy, engine, human beings, and culture. In the social phenomenon of American consumerism, for example, Callisto finds an entropic tendency. Like a prophet of impending doom, Callisto dictates aloud the tale of his own discovery of the entropic end of culture:

[...] he found in entropy or the measure of disorganization for a closed system an adequate metaphor to apply to certain phenomena in his own world. He saw, for example, the younger generation responding to Madison Avenue with the same spleen his own had once reserved for Wall Street: and in American 'consumerism' discovered a similar tendency from the least to most probable, from differentiation to sameness, from ordered individuality to a kind of chaos. He found himself, in short, restating Gibbs' prediction in social terms, and envisioned a heat-death for his culture in which ideas, like heat-energy, would no longer be transferred, since each point in it would ultimately have the same quantity of energy; and intellectual motion would, accordingly, cease. (SL 88-89)

The metaphoric connection between the heat-death of an isolated system and cultural decline is established by Callisto himself as he gives vent his thoughts. In Callisto's vision, within the closed system of a
culture, entropy builds up leading to the heat-death of ideas when ideas are no longer exchanged. The society that does not have the openness to accept and appreciate ideas from different societies and cultures is prone to degeneration as in the case of a closed thermodynamic system.

Representing the paradigm shift in socio-cultural and spiritual values of Europe and America, Pynchon’s novels invariably depict the world as a closed system with a strong tendency for entropic degeneration and death. Man, as Pynchon sees him, along with his universe, undergoes continuous degeneration. In a world where the value system has been sabotaged, conspiracies, slavery, exploitation, crises, riots, and wars would evolve, accentuating the entropic tendency of chaos. Pynchon’s novels, which generally depict such pathetic human experiences, can be read as manifestations of his entropic vision arising out of concern for the deteriorating humanity. The first “V” seen in the first novel V., suggests entropic disintegration of light. Standing on East Main in Norfolk, Virginia, Benny Profane notices mercury-vapour lamps overhead, their green light “receding in an asymmetric V to the east where it’s dark and there are no more bars” (10). In tune with the concept of entropy, a good number of Pynchon’s characters, dead or alive, encircled by mystery and darkness, are closed systems. The mysterious business magnate, Pierce Inverarity of The Crying of Lot 49, is dead even before the opening of the novel. “V” symbolizes the mysterious figure who was dead long before
Stencil began his quest. The characters von Trotha and Foppl are incarnations of cruelty, sadism and fascist ideologies. Katje is the “Domina Nocturna”, surrounded by darkness and degeneration. Captain Blicero is the personification forces of evil. Murder, corruption infidelity and moral degeneration encircle Frenesi. The colonists, Cornelius Vroom and Bonk represent exploitation, hypocrisy and moral decay.

The majority of Pynchon’s characters involve in their different endeavours either in physically closed spaces or in socially or culturally isolated regions. In V., Benny Profane and Father Fairing go down to the underground sewers for alligator hunt and evangelization respectively. The alligators hunted by Profane in the closed space beneath the streets of New York, seek death. Profane’s perception of the alligators’ death-wish could be a subconscious projection of his own desire to die. Foppl’s villa in Southwest Africa where the siege party is hosted is another typically closed space in which entropic tendencies of death, dehumanization and torture dominate (V. 234).

In The Crying of Lot 49, Oedipa Maas’ quest is mostly confined to the imaginary city of San Narciso. By naming the industrial city Pierce founded “San Narciso”, Pynchon makes a direct allusion to the myth of Narcissus. Pynchon’s reference to the Narcissus’ myth in The Crying of Lot 49, is suggestive of a closed system. “It represents a culture in love with a dream-image of itself” (Schaub 54). In the myth, Narcissus who falls in
love with himself, rejects the love of Echo, which eventually leads to his own end. In thermodynamic terms, he functions like a closed system that undergoes degeneration. In the novel, "Echo Courts" becomes the scene of the morally degenerate Oedipa's first adultery.

*Gravity's Rainbow* begins with the description of a scene of evacuation in the quagmire of chaos followed by bombing. The protagonist Tyrone Slothrop is technologically bound to the places devastated by bombing. The war and the psychological and social conditions in *Gravity's Rainbow* hold the belief that the world would soon collapse, and as the novel ends, a rocket is about to destroy a Los Angeles movie theatre in which the readers appear to be sitting. In *Mason & Dixon*, the black salves of South Africa and America are tortured and insulted, entangled in chains, and confined in closed spaces. The Herero community both in Southwest Africa and Germany are destined to destruction and mass suicide (*V.*, 276), (*G* 322). Characters of *Vineland*, whose destinies are determined and controlled by the modern technology, are slaves of the media culture.

Several of Pynchon's fictional characters are associated with "three of entropy's products: waste, disassembly, and inanimateness" (Stark 52). Pynchon uses literal examples of waste as part of a setting, such as the sewers of New York in *V.*, where Benny Profane and Father Fairing work. Many rubbish heaps appear in his works, as symbolic wastelands as well as
actual garbage. By extension, his novels are populated by many of the categories of people whom society regards as ‘rubbish’, socially useless junk, bums, hoboes, drifters, itinerants, vagrants, the disinherited, losers, and victims. Pynchon is continually bringing such figures back from the relative invisibility to which society consigns them. He also uses this concept to describe humans who have metaphorically turned waste. The patients in Dr. Schoenmaker’s waiting room in V., have repulsively ugly faces virtually corresponding to physical waste. And Dr. Schoenmaker, the plastic surgeon, who is committed to the repair of those damaged by the inanimate, deteriorates until he eventually falls in “alignment with the inanimate” himself (101). He gradually conceives the idea that his own patients are merely inanimate objects that need fixing. Pynchon’s protagonists often engage in their ambiguous quest for signs amidst the so-called ‘rubbish’. Slothrop wanders through the debris of bombing in the Zone and in London of Gravity’s Rainbow. The surveyors, Mason and Dixon, work among the Negro slaves in the European colonies of America and Cape Town, where the slaves are treated like nothing more than disposable waste (M&D).

There are many obvious references to disassembly and inanimateness in Pynchon’s novels. Fergus Mixolydian, a character in V. has connected his TV set to his forearm and thus becomes an extension of the inanimate object (56). In the SHROUD scene in V., the dialogue
between Benny Profane and the inanimate SHROUD points towards human affinity to the inanimate (284). SHROUD was a marvelous robot with both internal and external organs exactly like man. It even warns that Profane and his kind would one day become inanimate like automata (286). Here Pynchon visualizes humans turning into inanimate objects as part of the effects of entropy. Again in *V.*, the narrator recounts the story of children literally disassembling the Bad Priest, who has already turned partially waste. The Bad Priest is none other than V herself in disguise. There is a star sapphire at her naval. Her internal and external organs are made of artificial materials like plastic, silk, ivory etc. (343). Stencil experiences a vision of V as an automaton with a “digital machine in her skull” (412), but yet resembling a human being. But Pynchon leaves her human nature a disputable issue as blood begins to flow from her naval when the sapphire has been removed. Her death at sixty-three reveals how far “her progression toward the inanimate” has gone (410). In fact, the letter “V” finally comes to serve as a symbol for the entropic process itself. Another character, Mélanie, the ballerina, is actually treated as an object (fetish) and then made inanimate during a dance performance in Paris (414). Charles B Harris interprets these scenes as examples for “the dehumanizing processes of a mechanistic society that transforms animate man into inanimate automaton” (78). German colonial officials in Southwest Africa, as Pynchon describes them, considered the natives to be
no better than inanimate objects and then made them really inanimate by brutal killing.

_The Crying of Lot 49_ deals particularly with entropy as it relates to communications and with the waste of human values in a morally degenerating society. During Oedipa’s desperate quest for the meaning of the Tristero, the acronym “WASTE” haunts her. She decides to consult the psychiatrist Dr Hilarius to make sure whether or not she was in the hold of a psychosis. In everything connected to the postal system she comes across WASTE:

With her own eyes she had verified a WASTE system: seen two WASTE postmen, a WASTE mailbox, WASTE stamps, WASTE cancellations. And the image of the muted post horn all but saturating the Bay Area (132).

Mucho Maas, Oedipa’s husband, an extremely poor used-car dealer, thinks about the cars as “motorized metal extensions” of their owners, of their families, and what their whole life must be like “rusty underneath” (13). Again the awfully desperate and mechanical experiences in life prompt Mucho to imagine human life as a junkyard, where, like used cars, life too is meant to be demolished. Any reader of Pynchon will recognize that he has an extraordinary feeling for what society designates
as ‘rubbish.’ The images of the junkyard, ash, waste, exhaust, wreck, and death evoke a sense of inanimateness and entropic decline:

...see what it was, a movie, a woman, or a car you coveted, [...] all the bits and pieces coated uniformly, like a salad of despair, in a gray dressing ash, condensed exhaust, dust, body wastes—it made him sick to look, but he had to look. If it had been an outright junkyard, probably he could have stuck things out, made a career, the violence that had caused each wreck being infrequent enough, far enough away from him, to be miraculous, as each death, up till the moment of our own, is miraculous. (14)

In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Slothrop, the quester, appears to be partly inanimate, as his sexual responses right from his early childhood have been conditioned with a special kind of plastic, known as Imipolex G (249). Pökler, a German scientist involved in the rocket building programme, was considered by his wife Leni to be “an extension of the Rocket, long before it was built” (402). The rocket itself, while being an inanimate object and the symbol of mass destruction, has been treated by the German engineers as a device held against the entropies of nature. Weissmann, the leader of the German Rocket programme has given the following instruction to Enzian, his colleague and homosexual partner: “the Rocket was an entire system won, away from the feminine darkness, held against the entropies
of lovable but scatterbrained Mother Nature” (324). A lot of characters in the novel show evidence of indisputable inanimateness. Pynchon’s description of the mad scavenger Tchitcherine “who is more metal than anything else” is an illustrative example:

[...] Steel teeth wink as he talks. Under his pompadour is a silver plate. Gold wirework threads in three-dimensional tattoo among the fine wreckage of cartilage and bone inside his right knee joint. (337)

Towards the end of the novel, Gottfried, a young boy, is locked up in the rocket’s chamber, which is made of Imipolex G, and sacrificed as part of the rocket launching programme (759). Thus he is made literally inanimate. Slothrop’s absence in the last section of Gravity’s Rainbow, is actually a sign of his disintegration (738). In Vineland, Zoyd Wheeler’s madness and act of transfenestration depict his mental disassembly, if not physical. Prairie, the quester also experiences dejection and disintegration towards the end of the novel.

The introduction to Slow Learner refers also to the application of the concept of entropy by communication theorists, who give it a “cosmic moral twist” in current usage (13). Pynchon exploits the different connotations of entropy in information theory as well. In both thermodynamics and information theory, entropy signifies chaos. In
thermodynamics, entropy implies no positive connotation, as it denotes the measure of progressive disorganization of molecules within a closed system. According to information theory, overabundance of information leads to disorganization. But overabundance itself might increase the potential for the true message, provided one successfully sorts out the information. Thomas H. Schaub finds “overabundance of information and consequent disorganization,” as the reason for the ambiguity in Pynchon’s novels (CETP 51). Anne Mangel, who has written a clear introduction to cybernetic theories of information, in her article on The Crying of Lot 49, disagrees at this point and states: “it is the characters, not Pynchon, who transmit information badly” (205). In her view information is sometimes “lost or altered” during the process of transmission (204).

The early cyberneticists know, of course, that acquisition and distribution of information form the basis of the society.¹ Norbert Wiener in his book, Cybernetics, compares the social system with the system of communication itself, and expatiates on “the circular processes of a feedback nature” which plays an important role in communication (33). Wiener also compares entropy to information: “just as the amount of information in a system is a measure of its degree of organization, so the entropy of a system is a measure of its disorganization” (Cybernetics 18). In these terms society is the combat zone where the forces of information fight with the forces entropy. According to Wiener’s contention, entropy
and information are inversely proportional i.e., when information increases, entropy decreases. Disorganization in a society can be thwarted by proper attainment of information. John O. Stark recognizes that even “successfully coping with the enormous amount of information will not immediately create utopia” (64).

In *The Human Use of Human Beings* Wiener elaborates on the relation between society and information: “it is the thesis of this book that society can only be understood through a study of the messages and the communication facilities which belong to it” (25). The above statement enunciates an interesting conception of society. Reasonably, one can expect changes in the literary genre in accordance with social changes. The disorganized societies of Pynchon’s novels, tend to lose energy and sink toward inertness, thereby forcing their members to strive frantically for bits of information.

Herbert Stencil’s transhistorical and transcontinental quest to unravel the mystery behind “V” can be read in terms of information theory. The quester painstakingly gathers entirely different and thoroughly confusing sorts of information about the mystery figure, who in different places and in different periods of history, appears in bogus names and involves in a wide variety of social and anti-social activities like theological disputes, prostitution, spy work, riots, murder, uprisings, sponsorship of artistic performances etc. Stencil first reads about “V” from
his father’s journal under the heading “Florence, April, 1899.” He then collects information about her appearance as Victoria, a convent drop out in Alexandria and Cairo in 1898. Soon during the Fashoda crisis she emerges as a seductress and informer. The narrator mentions the year of Herbert Stencil’s birth as 1901, the year of Victoria’s death. But Stencil’s father doesn’t give details of his mother’s disappearance (52). Connected to Father Fairing’s sewer story, she appears to be Veronica, the rat. But V, who has expressed her desire to become a nun, outwits Fairing, the zealous missionary in theological disputes (117-121). Then she gets attached to names Venezuela and Vheissu on account of her nexus with the Venezuelan revolutionaries and Godolphin the explorer respectively (205). In France of 1913, the mysterious lady V., appears in twofold roles as sponsor of a cultural programme as well as the lesbian accomplice of Mélanie the ballerina (393-412). During the agitation in Malta in 1919, Stencil’s father, Sidney Stencil, meets her under the fake name Veronica Manganese, who involves in spy work, riots and murder (472). Mehemet’s story connects her to Valletta and Mara (460-64). In Mondaugen’s story V. appears in South West Africa in 1922, as Vera Meroving, a woman from Munich (236). In Fausto’s confessions V. appears to be “the Bad Priest” who has been killed during the siege of Malta in 1942 (341-343). Thus Stencil, the quester, is confronted with a profusion of information, which seemed to be desperately shuffled, signifying the entropic situation of disorganization. He seems to be reminded of Fausto’s concept of logic:
“logic is a human attribute after all, so even that it’s a misnomer” (484). Here Wiener’s argument that society can be understood through messages becomes relevant, as Pynchon makes use of Stencil’s quest basically to portray the different facets of the western society.

The character V. herself, embodies the age’s love affair with bloodshed and killing, and thus its failure to resist entropic drift. Unlike his modernist masters, who exploit the element of universal, instinctive truth in myth, Pynchon reveals such constructs as factitious, merely the projection of humanity’s desperate need for order, coherence, and connectedness. No pattern palliates our plight. In V., as David Cowart establishes, “Pynchon ultimately reveals nothing more than the entropic acceleration of disorder” (The Art of Allusion 6).

In The Crying of Lot 49, Oedipa Maas tries even crazily to collect information about Inverarity’s estate. Pierce Inverarity, Oedipa’s former lover, was a powerful industrial tycoon with a lot of mysterious connections. As the executor of Inverarity’s will, she comes across a lot of perplexing industrial institutions like weapon factories, cigarette factories, mysterious symbols like the Tristero, the muted post horn, Thurn and Taxis, etc. to which Inverarity was associated. Overabundance of information adds to her the mystery linked with the symbols. The more Oedipa learns about Inverarity’s underground business relations, the less effectively can she order her knowledge and the less capably can she act.
In a state of doubtful sanity or paranoia she thinks of such varying types of concepts as real devices or systems used by the spiritually arid society for communication:

Either way, they'll call it paranoia. They. Either you have stumbled indeed, without the aid of LSD or other indole alkaloids, onto a secret richness and concealed density of dream; onto a network by which X number of Americans are truly communicating whilst reserving their lies, recitations of routine, arid betrayals of spiritual poverty, for the official government delivery system; may be even onto a real alternative to the exitlessness, to the absence of surprise to life, that harrows the head of everybody American you know, and you too, sweetie. Or you are hallucinating it. (170)

Oedipa’s efforts to disentangle Inverarity’s estate involve her in a study of the society. She realizes that her world is an enormous system of communication, feeding her information, which may engulf her before it enlightens. She faces specific problems on her way. Her attempts to verify the Tristero take her into history, where she is confronted by various editions, pirated copies, questionable sources, and finally death. But sorting is her task, and she requires for this work some infusion of energy from the outside to counter the entropic movement inside toward chaos, disorganization, and decay. This need underlies her desire to find out the
reality behind historical Wharfinger. To resolve this uncertainty, Oedipa needs information not subject to time, but "the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night" (118). In fact, she is waiting for a revelation, seeking it in the historical, secular and time-bound world around her, but finding no God beyond the words, she hopes, will tell her the truth. She can never get beyond herself, her language, or outside of time, but remains in a state of entanglement:

There’d seemed no limit to what the printed circuit could have told her (if she had tried to find out); so in her first minute of San Narciso, a revelation also trembled just past the threshold of her understanding. Smog all round the horizon, the sun on the bright beige countryside was painful; she and the Chevy seemed parked at the centre of an odd religious instant. (24)

The concept of Tristero remains so shadowy that even its existence becomes open to question. It could be taken to reveal her craving for information as well as Pynchon’s alarm over social lies, his desire for social alternatives, and his conceptions of those alternatives in the disorganized network of information. Because of information’s social and personal importance, one must know how to obtain it. One needs to discover patterns not only when one has too little information but also when one has too much. Pynchon’s characters find themselves in the latter difficulty much more often than the former. Increasing randomness is a
feature of entropic processes that threaten the characters in all of Pynchon’s novels, but it also allows for human freedom, for an escape from conditioning. Kurt Mondaugen, an electronics engineer in Gravity’s Rainbow, compares the constant fluctuations in information to the flow of electrons:

The constant, pure flow. Signals—sense data, feelings, memories relocating—are put onto the grid, and modulate the flow. We live lives that are waveforms constantly changing with time, now positive, now negative. Only in a moment of great serenity is it possible to find the pure, the informationless state of signal zero. (GR 404)

In his fourth novel, Vineland, which extensively employs the concept of informational entropy in the context of sixties’ cybernetics, Pynchon exposes the coercive and destructive impact of the media specifically in the American society. The central plot of the novel is woven around Prairie’s technologically aided quest for her mother, Frenesi. Prairie utilizes technological gadgets like the computer, the television, and the film, to gather information about her mother. Like Oedipa, she is worst confounded by the abundance of information, whereby she feels unable to select the proper information. Prairie’s quest represents the plight of the terribly media addicted society. Pynchon exposes also the intricacies of the media aided intrigues for political maneuverings, in tune with Norbert
Wiener’s idea of the science of cybernetics as the “field of control and communication … whether in the machine or in the animal” (Cybernetics 56).

The fifth novel, *Mason & Dixon* portrays the entropic degeneration within the closed system of the world, in both physical and cultural terms. The European colonies of the eighteenth century America and Africa exactly resembled closed systems, or hothouses where human freedom was denied. The black-skinned African slaves were subjected to abominable torture by the white colonists. In the closed space of the colonies, the surveyors, Mason and Dixon acted like Maxwell’s Demon separating the slave states and free states, providing opportunity for regeneration and liberation.

Oedipa’s activity of sorting of information in *The Crying of Lot 49*, can be read as an endeavor to counter the degenerating randomness of entropy. In the process of her sorting, she accumulates information and organizes it into the Tristero. The clues about the Tristero have originated in a system or culture, which is running down, and Oedipa seeks to redeem the system by properly sorting the information. Towards the final phase of her quest she realizes: “This is America, you live in it, you let it happen. Let it unfurl” (150). She regards her quest as an enquiry into the nature of her country as a whole. Her sorting represents the possible opposition to disorganization within the system. In all the five novels of Pynchon, the
protagonists are confronted with the task of sorting messages out of chaotic accumulation of information. Sorting, indeed, is an activity which prevents disorganization, and thereby the entropic drift. In *The Crying of Lot 49* Pynchon illustrates Oedipa's acquaintance with Maxwell's Demon, a hypothetical possibility to check entropic decay. At the Yoyodyne plant, attempting to sort out Inverarity's will, Oedipa meets with an employee named Stanley Koteks. He introduces the concept of Maxwell's Demon to Oedipa. Maxwell claimed that if a "Demon" sorted into different compartments high-energy particles and low energy particles, the Demon could make a perpetual motion machine, because the two compartments would have different amounts of potential energy. As Koteks explains to her, Maxwell's Demon, which sorts out the fast molecules from the slow ones within a thermodynamic system, can defy the law of entropy by producing uninterrupted motion:

The Demon could sit in a box among air molecules that were moving at all different random speeds, and sort out the fast molecules from the slower ones. Fast molecules have more energy than slow ones. Concentrate enough of them in one place and you have a region of high temperature. You can then use the difference in temperature between this hot region of the box and any cooler region, to drive a heat engine. Since the Demon only sat and sorted, you wouldn't have put any real
work into the system. So you would be violating the Second Law of Thermodynamics, getting something for nothing, causing perpetual motion. (86)

Like the Demon, Oedipa tries to order the signs and symbols around her into some kind of operational meaning. Similarly the questers in the other novels of Pynchon also involve in gathering and some kind of sorting of information. Throughout his quest Stencil gathers information about V., and tries to decode the meaning. Slothrop also strives to interpret the mystery behind his strange sexual response. Tapping information from different media sources like the computer, the film and the TV, Prairie, the central character in C'iteland struggles to reconstruct the whereabouts of her mother Frenesi who abandoned her. Involving in astronomical observation and geographical survey, Mason and Dixon gather and organize information about slavery and suffering in different colonies. All these characters in some way or other yearn to prevent the system, i.e., the world, from total degeneration and chaos. In terms of Maxwell’s theory, all the protagonists function like the “Demon” who ameliorates the condition in the closed system increasing the potential for work, preventing “heat-death.”

Pynchon’s metaphoric application of the principle of entropy depicts and analyses the postmodern predicament in terms of contemporary technology. It is presumed that the concept of entropy is applicable only to
closed systems, and Pynchon’s novels depict the world as a closed system subject to entropic decay. The symptoms of cultural entropic decay manifest in the form of wars, carnage, violence, riots, murder, exploitation, slavery, bodily diseases, psychic disorders, perversions, immorality and spiritual decline. Pynchon’s fictional world powerfully presents many of these symptoms of entropic degeneration through different works. As the principle of entropy is applied thermodynamically to closed systems only, entropic deterioration is applicable to culturally closed systems also. Applied to the socio-cultural scenario, the contentions of the second law of thermodynamics imply that the world has the inherent tendency to decline and degenerate. Entropy, therefore, both thermodynamically and culturally signifies the intrinsically desperate tendency of decay. But as Maxwell’s Demon suggests, Pynchon does not leave the universe entirely for total degeneration and “heat-death.” Instead, in his fictional works, though the wretched and hopeless aspect of human existence is highlighted, he also integrates the means to escape the ultimate heat-death. Human culture as a system becomes closed when infusion of external energy in the form of ideas becomes unreachable. Norbert Wiener himself has left open the possibility for resisting or evading entropy: “There are local enclaves whose direction seems opposed to that of the universe at large and in which there is a limited and temporary tendency for organization to increase” (HUHB 21).
In spite of the phenomenal declining tendency of man and his culture for various reasons, Pynchon explores also the possibilities for resistance right from the beginning. In the story “Entropy” Callisto tries to escape entropic deterioration by transforming his apartment into “a tiny enclave of regularity, in the city’s chaos, alien to the vagaries of the weather, of national politics, of any civil disorder” (SL 83-84). The story deals with the certainty of decline as well as its exceptions as discussed by Wiener above. Here Pynchon follows Wiener’s terminology closely. Callisto “hoped, strong enough not to drift into the graceful decadence of an enervated fatalism” (87). He shares his enclave with Aubade, his mistress, who also struggles against chaos to preserve the purity of their world. Together they manage to maintain the ecological harmony of the system by supporting life in all its forms:

Through trial and error Callisto had perfected its ecological balance, with the help of the girl its artistic harmony, so that the swayings of its plant life, the stirrings of its birds and human inhabitants were all as integral as the rhythms of a perfectly-executed mobile. He and the girl could no longer be omitted from that sanctuary; they had become necessary to its unity. (SL 84)

Callisto and Aubade realize the true value of love and life in harmony with nature, for making the universe a place of peace and order.
thereby preventing disorganization and decline. But “the architectonic purity” of their world was constantly threatened by hints of anarchy (88). Their attempt at establishing a life of peace and harmony with nature and fellow human beings discloses in seminal form Pynchon’s vision of life.

In all the five novels, he invariably depicts different aspects of discord and entropic decline in socio-cultural terms, but with an ultimate hope of harmony and accord. The characters who resist the inevitable drift toward chaos and death embody Pynchon’s vision. Pynchon eventually dissociates himself from pessimism despite his awareness of the inexorable movement toward disaster. He seems to agree with Norbert Wiener, who, after recognizing the fact of entropy notes in *The Human Use of Human Beings*:

> In a very real sense we are shipwrecked passengers on a doomed planet. Yet even in a shipwreck, human decencies and human values do not necessarily vanish, and we must make the most of them. We shall go down, but let it be in a manner to which we may look forward as worthy of our dignity. (27)

Pynchon has adapted Wiener’s imagery of a wrecked ship, to present Mehemet’s strange vision of painting a sinking ship (*V.*, 460). Discarding the awareness of the fact of gradual sinking, the sailor continues his work
of painting. Regardless of the absurdity of all actions in a universe doomed
to disintegration, man must attempt to prevent entropy. Mehemet is one of
Pynchon's astute characters of unyielding optimism. He instills into the
mind of the reader the vision that disintegration can be resisted even though
human endeavors are foredoomed to failure. Such relentless efforts make
life worth living. Pynchon manages to show the prospect of resisting the
entropic process by presenting binaries, which function like "local
enclaves" in the utterly chaotic world. As in Callisto's example, one can
find at least a few characters in Pynchon's novels genuinely motivated by
ideals of love, charity and social justice who give meaning to human
existence in a world of chaos and hatred. Pynchon thus alludes to the
possibility and the necessity of external, probably spiritual, intervention
that might check the terrific entropic process.

In Gravity's Rainbow a few of the heterosexual relationships,
however, such as Roger Mexico and Jessica Swanlake's, offer much hope.
Characters like Pökler resist the disintegration around them by love and
acts of charity. But in the gloomy world which Gravity's Rainbow creates
with such meticulous care, the kind of hope embodied in any alternative
can only be tentative. In The Crying of Lot 49, Oedipa, though a wanderer
of loose morals, enriches her life by helping an unfortunate sailor. In
Vineland, Zoyd Wheeler's act of transfenestration can be read as an act of
altruism as it is meant to support his daughter. Love, in contrast, by
metaphorically keeping open the boundaries between people, can be both vital and resistant to entropy. In *Mason & Dixon*, Dixon's act of courage motivated by a high sense of justice is truly liberating. In addition to love, coherent pattern making fits this description of the non-entropic enclaves or organisms, which are, according to Wiener, "opposed to chaos, to disintegration, to death, as message is to noise" (129). Here Wiener comments that anything, or any person, who can maintain its organic nature will survive entropy. Wiener thus inadvertently states most of Pynchon's major themes. Throughout Pynchon's novels, despite the portrayal of cultural decadence in its various forms, one can also find a note of optimism.

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1 The word "cybernetics" is derived from the Greek word for steersman. The steersman constantly checks the position of the rudder against the course. The early cyberneticists dreamed of devising a new science that would combine parts of old sciences by arranging *information* into new patterns. Developments in computer science have aided their efforts, and they have pointed out striking analogies among sciences (Stark 60).

2 James Clerk Maxwell was a nineteenth-century physicist who, in 1871, published the following speculation in his *Theory of Heat*: "Now let us suppose that ... a vessel is divided into two portions, A and B, by a division in which there is a small hole, and that a being, who can see the individual molecules, opens and closes this hole, as to allow only the swifter molecules to pass from A to B, and only the slower ones to pass from B to A. He will thus without expenditure of work, raise the temperature of B and lower that of A, in contradiction to the second law of thermodynamics" (quoted in Kerry Grant 68).