CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Our story's finished before it starts

JOHN BARTHY, LOST IN THE FUNHOUSE

... and nothing begins, and nothing ends.

THOMAS PYNCHON, GRAVITY'S RAINBOW

7.1.0 Among the pluriverions of Postmodernism, the versions of Barth and Pynchon are studied to explicate the oneness in their concern for the theme of fluidity of identity. Towards expressing the postmodern fragmentation, these writers converge in their thinking and disseminate identity in terms of nameless, characterless anonymity; ailments in relation to pathology; remedies pertaining to control systems; dismemberment owing to deflated myths and reversal of identity-quests on account of their deteleological textual basis. Each of the previous chapters dealt with these fractional aspects of identity respectively.

7.1.1 The first chapter, in order to explicate the deconstructed vision of identity or 'I'-de-entity in the Postmodern climate, made a critical survey of the term and the trend. Basically it was shown that the trend disqualifies the meaning of identity implying sameness, continuity and fixity. The chapter discussed Erik Erikson's concept of the formation of identity as a psychosocial relativity existing in a sense of personal sameness and historical continuity, which was contrasted with Norman Holland's proposal of a conflicted identity right from the moment the child realises the visible boundary between the mother and itself. These concepts, together with Jaques Lacan's
proposition that the child has to enter into a linguistic network of signifieds and signifiers, especially, when the hierarchical role of the Transcendental Signified got decentred, proved that the definition of identity suggesting fixity and permanence is limited and lacking. And to survive in the postmodern milieu and construe identity, a person needed to experiment with many roles and disguises thereby to fabricate various versions of identity. After defining what is meant by ‘version’ in a Postmodern backdrop, the chapter presented a preview of the ensuing analysis of the versions of Barth and Pynchon in the subsequent chapters.

7.1.2.1 The second chapter presented how the tension between the external pressurised social order and the precarious inner psychic structure could result in the anonymity of an individual. As in the case of Proteus, ‘character’ was used as an apparel to cover the inner volatile self by the protean wo/men. The volatility of the self-process was described to be as a result of the following features: a spiritual/symbolic fatherlessness, disregard for social institutions like family and marriage, shuffling of masks/roles, severing of the connections between names and the named, circuitous quests, followed by self-deception and desolation.

7.1.2.2 The cases of Pynchon’s Sidney Stencil, Benny Profane, Paola Majistral in V., Oedipa Maas in The Crying of Lot 49, in relation to Barth’s Todd Andrews in The Floating Opera, George in Giles Goat-Boy, Henry Burlingame III, Ebenezer and Anna cooke in The Sot-Weed Factor were studied under the theme of their symbolic/spiritual fatherlessness. The innumerous extramarital affairs and divorces propounded in the examples of Barth’s Jacob Horner in The End of the Road, and Todd Andrews in The
Floating Opera juxtaposed with Pynchon’s Mucho and Oedipa Maas in The Crying of Lot 49 and Winsome, Mafia, Pappy Hod and Paola in V., clearly stated the protean wo/men’s non-conformity to social institutions. The Protean Men’s desire to disassociate themselves from women were expressed in the non-heroic stances of Barth’s Horner, Todd, the Spermatozoon-protagonist in “Night-Sea Journey” and Pynchon’s Profane, Stencil, Pig, and Mondaugen in V.

7.1.2.3 Other than the characters and novels mentioned above, an analysis of Barth’s Henry Burlingame III in Sot-Weed Factor, Harold Bray in Giles Goat Boy, and Pynchon’s V. in V., Pierce Inverarity in The Crying of Lot 49, Katje Borgesius and Tyrone Slothrop in Gravity’s Rainbow illustrated the prevarication of their identities by use of masks and role-plays. Further, the point of polynames/namelessness of characters are exemplified from Pynchon’s V. and The Crying of Lot 49 and Barth’s The End of the Road, Lost in the Funhouse, Giles Goat Boy, The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor. For the discussion of protean wo/man questors, the chapter included Barth’s Fenwick Turner and Susan Seckler in Sabbatical, Katherine Sherritt Sagamore and her husband Peter Sagamore in Tide Water Tales. The analyses ended with a focus on the self-doubts the questors were confronted with towards the end of their journeys. In addition to this, the chapter showed the consistency in which Barth and Pynchon use a cluster of jelly-images like amoeba, blot, stain, blob to describe the volatility of their protean wo/men’s identities. These images linked further in their watery nature with another cluster of sea animal images as sponge, crab, oyster,
nautilus, mollusc and tortoise connoted the authors' appropriate choice in revealing the interiorly corroded selves of the protean wo/men

7.1.3.1 The third chapter presented the Protean Wo/Man's fruitless battle to constitute identity that winds up in pathology. It analysed the characteristic sickness of Barth's Todd Andrews, Captain Osborn Jones, Harrison Mack and others in *The Floating Opera*, Ebenezer Cooke and Joan Toast in *The Sot-Weed Factor* and Pynchon's Sidney Stencil in *V*, which are symptomatic of 'Entropy' and 'Cosmopsis.' The definition of entropy indicated the disintegration of energy and that of cosmopsis enlightening a cosmic awareness resulting in the paralysis of the mind and the body.

7.1.3.2 The chapter applied these scientific/philosophical maladies to vivify the deranged personalities of the chosen writers in the following manner: firstly, by tracing the writers' and their characters' preoccupations with death in *The Floating Opera*, *The End of the Road*, *The Sot-Weed Factor*, "Entropy," *V*, *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow*. Secondly, by exposing the inanimate stillness within the cosmoptic/entropic protean wo/men. Thirdly, by exemplifying the surrogates offered by the inanimate for the dis-integrated animate in the characterisation of Pynchon's Rachel and *V.* and Barth's WESCAC--the super computer. Fourthly, by illustrating the use of the word/image: 'rock' by Pynchon in its noun form and by Barth in its verb form to denote the inanimate placidity. Further, by purporting the significance of Barth's cosmoptic characters' rocking--a movement without any progress--a connection was observed in various kinds of meaningless movements in Pynchon's entropic individuals. Fifthly, by contrasting these people with the homeostatic group, who resist motion, the chapter classified the tendency
for negative entropy. Finally, by depicting the form of decay and waste in the novels of Barth and Pynchon it authenticated the servitude entropy imposes on all forms of energies; active or passive, physical or mental, ordered or disordered in reality.

7.1.4.1 The fourth chapter dealt with the remedies offered by Barth (Mythotherapy) and Pynchon (Cybernetics) through a control system for the maladies discussed in its preceding chapter. To start with, the chapter placed Barth and Pynchon in their intellectual background that was foregrounded by the Behaviourist and Cyberneticians’ theories which were seen to have influenced these novelists in their view of human beings as conditioned robots. It discussed the uncanny doctor-patient relationships in these writers in terms of conditioner-conditioned identities and especially outlined this aspect in the mysterious ties between Barth’s Jacob Horner-The Doctor in The End of the Road; George-Dr. Max Spielman in Giles Goat-Boy, Pynchon’s Oedipa-Dr. Hilarius in The Crying of Lot 49; and provided a summative list for an overall mapping.

7.1.4.2 The fourth chapter also pointed out the failure of Mythotherapeutic control because of its human touch and the illusory success of the mechanically controlled Cybernetic therapies. This aspect was outlined in Oedipa’s analogous functioning with Maxwell’s Demon in Pynchon’s novel, The Crying of Lot 49 and Barth’s idea of using a super computer for control in the story of WESCAC in his Giles Goat-Boy. Comparably, the predominant role that Television plays in shaping and controlling human relationships and identities in Pynchon’s Vineland was explicated to illustrate how these demonic tools of control have replaced the essential role of God.
7.1.5.1 The fifth chapter subverted the conventional notion that myth primarily played a significant role in organising the patterns of all forms of identities. It briefly consolidated the modernist and postmodernist stances in the use/abuse of myth. For the postmodernists like Barth and Pynchon, it was revealed that myth can no more function to order a chaotic reality and thereby construe identity. Therefore, it explicated the way Barth used to deflate myth by referring to it realistically in his *Chimera*. Similarly, Pynchon's *Vineland* was dealt with to reveal the mythical dimension given to contemporary tele-serial characters by the author to close the gap between myth and reality. This was juxtaposed with Barth's *LETTERS* where the novelist conjures up characters from his own fictions and attributes them mythical status. Further, the analyses of the characters: Pynchon's Slothrop in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Barth's Todd Andrews in *The Floating Opera*, and George in *Giles Goat-Boy* and Oedipa Maas in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, respectively in a mythical perspective pictured the distortion of the Classical myths as those of Oedipus, Orpheus and Narcissus.

7.1.5.2 The chapter also threw light on "hierophany"--the manifestation of the sacred in the profane--which is the authors' strategy to demystify Biblical myths. This was exemplified in Pynchon's use of rats as objects of carnality to subvert the spiritual hierarchy posed by the Christian religion in *V.*, and the illusive use of rainbow symbol and holy grail in *Gravity's Rainbow*, along with Barth's parodic version of the Christian hero in the characterisation of George in *Giles Goat-Boy*. Finally the chapter concluded with the note that in their parodic use of myths, these authors satirise the extremely self-introverted form of life in contemporary American society.
7.1.6 The sixth chapter placed the theme of fluidity of identity in its textual context. In order to elucidate the idea that the process in which a person constructs his self to create identity parallels an author's weaving of his text, the chapter traced the quests of cosmoptic/entropic questors that were all initiated and persuaded by texts. Thus it studied Stencil's quest for V., Oedipa's quest for Trystero and Barth's Todd's "Inquiry" into the probable reasons for his father's suicide. It observed the difference in the way both the writers approach textual fluidity; while Pynchon's characters act or acted upon according to the scripts written for them, Barth's characters write their own scripts. And revealed this aspect in the narrativity of Todd, the story of the narrative voices of Lost in the funhouse, the computer-text of Giles Goat-Boy, which is juxtaposed to the rocket-text in Gravity's Rainbow, and finally, the meta-text of LETTERS. In addition to this, the chapter analysed the parodic use of conventional fictional types and devices by Barth and Pynchon. Finally it showed that the indeterminacy of the textual quests and the randomness of their associative meanings could only result in the subversion of these quests asserting the fluidity of postmodern, protean self and the text ultimately. The chapter also flashed on the arrival of a new genre "the Hypertext" which seems to forebode the ending of not only the printed texts but also the way Postmodernism has been perceived till date.

7.2.0 In order to study the elusive phenomenon that Postmodernism is, critics and writers have selected many approaches and methodologies. Similarly they have selected the works of different fictionalists and critics according to the theme they have proposed to analyse. Also there is no uniformity in the choice they make of the writers. For
instance, while some choose Barth to analyse the metafictional aspects of Postmodernism [Refer: Marjorie Godlin Roemer, "The Paradigmatic Mind: John Barth's LETTERS (1987), Max F. Schulz, The Muses of John Barth: Tradition and Metafiction (1990)] others choose Pynchon for the same [Refer: Charles Russell, "Pynchon’s Language: Signs, Systems, and Subversion" (1988), David Seed, The Fictional Labyrinths of Thomas Pynchon (1988)], few others opt for Donald Barthelme, John Hawkes, Roland Barthes et al. This is largely on account of the complexity and flexibility of the postmodern tendency. On the one hand, when postmodernism frustrates any earnest reader who searches for order in its increasing complexity, on the other, it bewilders the forbearing and patient reader with its amazing flexibility.

7.2.1 Paradoxically, no two postmodern writers are similar in their complex endeavours while any two writers, in their postmodern flexibility/fluidity, can be clubbed together for a thematic study. To put it rather crudely, not just John Barth and Thomas Pynchon, but Donald Barthelme and E. L. Doctorov, Roland Barthes and John Hawkes, William Gass and Jerzy Kosinski, Italo Calvino and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, J. M. Coetzee and Salman Rushdie could be studied under the same fluidity of identity theme. However this is not to make a claim that the choice of Barth and Pynchon by this thesis writer is at random.

7.2.2.1 After a survey it was found that of all the postmodern twins, Barth and Pynchon were identified less together, and if identified together, they were not given a complete focus on the aspect of the problem of identity. Some critics have placed Pynchon and Barth in juxtaposition, for example: Charles B. Harris, Contemporary American Novelists

7.2.2.2 Though Tanner devotes individual chapters to analyse the entropic/comoptic aspect of Pynchon and Barth, the perspective is of a more general nature. In like manner, Harris's work studies the absurdist tendencies in these fictionalists and places them in the American tradition of the absurd. The expectations raised in the title of McConnell's work gets punctured when we realise that the critic's approach to these writers is with the modernist spectacles. He reads the works of these writers, as one would interpret and try to understand the works of Pound, Yeats and Eliot in relation to their mythical method. In order to revert from an apocalyptic vision, he observes that writers such as Bellow, Mailer, Pynchon and Barth attempt to locate, within the very centre of the contemporary wasteland, mythologies of psychic survival and social, political health. Thus he finds the objective of these writers in writing the postmodern fictions is to reconsolidate myths and hence they use their novels as plots to discover the underlying myths that will make living easier and comprehensible. He continues to make similar assertions and generalisations that one cannot but feel, as Harris puts it, "... it is to the general reader to whom McConnell directed his book in the first place" (1980, 10).

7.2.2.3 There are quite a few articles that deal with some of the themes discussed in this thesis. Daniel Majdiak's "Barth and the Representation of Life" (1980), for example,
takes in its concern the theme of fluidity of identity and focuses on Barth’s Cosmopsis and Mythotherapy. But the focus pertains to only Barth and the study is limited strictly to his novel, The End of the Road. A full-fledged research work with particular reference to Barth and Pynchon in relation to the study of identity in its personal, pathological, therapeutic, mythical and textual fluidity is obviously missing. Hence this thesis has made an attempt to present Barth and Pynchon in their postmodern fluid context of fragmented identity. A recapitulation of the analyses done in the preceding chapters with respect to the kind of versions/subversions that Barth and Pynchon create in their fictional worlds helped us to understand the problems of identity in a dismembered postmodern sensibility.

7.3.0 Though both the writers create two versions of Postmodernism, their artifices sometimes vary in their subversive re-presentations. Barth produces blitheringly sophomoric books. They are too cerebral and too self-conscious. His fictions are excursions on philosophical themes. His inventions as ‘Cosmopsis’ and ‘Mythotherapy’ have philosophical roots and to some extent they are meant to ridicule existentialism. Barth’s fables are based on intellectual attitudes embodied in character and action. And as Alan Trachtenberg points out, “Barth’s artifices remind us of Lawrence Sterne, his themes bring to mind Melville, Mark Twain and the Marquis de Sade. There is also a hint of Doestoevsky, Camus and Thomas Mann. The heart of Barth’s work, the discourse which informs his comedy, is the problem of existence and identity. He sees the world as a fluid place, making any position slippery and untenable” (1963, 9).
7.3.1 “Many critics believe,” as in the case of Charles Hollander that, “Pynchon deserves to be considered among the best writers of the century, with the likes of Borges, Kafka, Proust, and Joyce. Like theirs his works are complex, dense, intricate, and difficult. In addition, Pynchon rather than seeking clarification makes mysteries” (1990, 5). Pynchon, with his background as an Engineering student at Cornell University, draws metaphors and allusions from Science and Technology so easily that creates ‘mysteries’ for his purely literary reader. Commenting on Pynchon’s style, Hollander says, “Stylistically, Pynchon is in the tradition of Joyce and Nabokov--that of punster, puzzler intimater, word-gamer, allusionist, and fabricator of grotesqueries” (5). While Barth is more conscious about the problems of writing, Pynchon’s fictions involve problems of reading and interpretation; whereas Barth’s characters play the role of the author, Pynchon’s play the role of the reader. Pynchon being a codeist, his readers are forced to crypto-analyse to arrive at his beliefs. But the text both writers weave constantly point out their own artificiality, their identity as literature, or to be precise, postmodern literature.

7.3.2 The literary influences on Barth and Pynchon above indicated are only a few select samples. Critics go on tracing the influences on Barth and Pynchon right from Shakespeare or even from Sophocles and Homer. Yet, influences are not to be treated as mere reflections but as refractions. Patricia Tobin’s contention about Barth’s reaction to literary predecessors is true of Pynchon as well as the postmodern fictionalists in general. Tobin in John Barth and the Anxiety of Continuance convincingly applies Harold Bloom’s The Anxiety of Influence and A Map of Misreading theories to Barth’s works. “Tobin’s theory is that Barth, instead of negating, joyfully seized on such an anxiety as a means of
capitalising on his literary forbears, and rather than avoiding the influences, he embraced them, revised them, and at the same time, glorified them by going them one better” (qtd. Bowen 1994, 21).

7.3.4 In this respect, an important contention in Holland’s article, “Unity, Identity, Text, Self” (1975) is that the self is always in a continuous process of identity-creation according to its identity-theme conception. That is, the numerous versions that any writer may create may amount to one major Text that may reflect the unity of his self. Put in this way, while Barth and Pynchon are creating their own versions through their texts, they do contribute together to the Postmodern De-teleological Text. Holland further points out how even the interpretation of one reader will be singled out from that of the others depending upon the version he infers from the text in relation to his identity theme with that of the author. He explains:

Only those thoughts that could be expressed through words could be expressed. The unity we find in literary texts is impregnated with the identity that finds that unity. This is simply to say that my reading of a certain literary work will differ from yours or his or hers. As readers, each of us will bring different kinds of external information to bear. Each will seek out the particular themes that concern him. Each will have different ways of making the text into an experience with a coherence and significance that satisfies. (1971,816).

Certainly, every reader seeks his own particular version of aesthetic unity. Often Barth and Pynchon allude to God as the Novelist, the World as His Text. And these tale-bearers as reflectors of reality, function as the readers of His Text. If these readers are seeking
their own particular versions of aesthetic unity in relation to the Text and the Novelist, then, one cannot but wonder like one of their characters, "whether God is a postmodernist..." (TT 368).

7.3.5 In this way, John Barth and Thomas Pynchon represent two versions of Postmodernism. However, 'two versions,' in this respect, do not carry the implication that one is thetic while the other is an antithetic version. Nor can they mean to consider Barth and Pynchon as a sort of identical and/or non-identical 'Postmodern twins' since the two versions created by them are neither just parallels nor simply binaries. They are 'one and many,' 'both and and' and 'and and also.' They float like refracted rays from a spectrum and form part of a continuum. And they are set apart only by thinly visible fluid boundaries. It is on this fluidity the axis of this thesis is drawn upon.

7.4.0 For a reader, who would prefer to explore this fluidity theme further, there are many areas that this thesis has left unexplored due its spatial and temporal constraints. The apocalypse vision of the novelists was dealt in Chapter III with particular reference to entropy, yet the theme deserves a complete study in relation to all the other themes and concerns of the selected writers. Also there was a brief discussion in Chapter IV about computer creating texts, which was further realised in the form of "Hypertexts" in Chapter VI, even then, a major focus could be given on the texts of Pynchon and Barth as "Cyberpunks" or artificially controlled fictions. In like manner, the metafictional/historiographic metafictional aspects of these writers deserve further elaboration. Similarly, in Chapter V, the subversive use of myths is restricted, an elaborative research could be done by tracing out the subversive and parodic twists of
these writers from their original sources as Robert Graves’s *The Greek Myths* and *The White Goddess* and James G. Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*. The androgynous distortion alone calls for a thesis of this magnitude. These gaps in this thesis also account for the imperceptibility of the fluidity theme in totem.

7.4.1 The fluid permeability of the select topic has also posed structural difficulties. Therefore, the chapter divisions could not be done in symmetry; in order to show consistency and to analyse each of the novels of these writers in juxtaposition say, *The Floating Opera* versus *The Crying of Lot 49*; *Lost in the Funhouse* versus *Slow Learner* and *Giles Goat-Boy* versus *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Though it is a comparative study, as the focus is on the merging of identities and rupturing of hierarchies, this work has not brought in any comparison that might involve the personalities of these two writers and thereby form value judgements. In fact, it has discreetly dodged even attempting a biographical survey of these writers. Thus, at length, the validity of this thesis lies in this: it has chosen to hold the torch than the sceptre.

7.5.0 In conclusion, this thesis on the postmodern fluidity of identity has in each of the chapters proposed a mode of perceiving it, and towards the end, negated it to alter it to the next mode. Thus the fluidity of identity/"I"-de-entity proposed in the first chapter was to be re-viewed in the nomenclature of the “protean wo/men” of anomalies in the second chapter. The second chapter identified the fundamental inner sicknesses that underlined the volatility of the anomalies, which in turn yielded to the remedies prescribed in the fourth chapter. These remedies too failed, as it was revealed in the fifth chapter, because of the lack of a myth to control and structure the background of the
entropic/cosmoptic patients and their mythotherapeutic/cybernetic doctor-controllers. The sixth chapter succeeded in deconstructing this view and located the problem in the textual fluidity that have initiated as well as nullified the search for identities of the protean questors. This last chapter, while summing up the versions and reversions of this fluidity theme, confronts with the crucial problem of conclusion--in the conventional sense of giving a report of the findings or offering solutions, as the fluidity theme cannot have a conclusion that might indicate a fixity of identity, the very sense of which the Postmodernists struggle to thwart away from.

7.5.1 However, in order to express this fluidity theme clearly, ironically, this thesis has been structured into seven chapters each analysing and consolidating one of its ramifications. But the reader should not be deluded into the belief that there is a fixity proposed through this thesis, which would defeat its very purpose. What the thesis has offered is a key but not the key. Postmodernism is a labyrinthine with many doors and many exists, for which a single key is inadequate. And as Barth puts it, "... the key to the treasure is the treasure" (CH 8). Therefore to comprehend the Postmodern fluidity is to grapple with it but not to contain it.