The Economics of Fantasy

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Where, indeed, was the father? The question that closes *The White Hotel* is the same one that haunts postmodern fiction generally. Confronted by the empty dreams of engineering power, betrayed by technology, revealed in his own fantasies as the violent yet derivative consumer, the father is truly a deeply troubled ghost who stalks living white masculinity with tenacious staying power. Donald Barthelme aptly portrays “the Dead Father” as the massive rock-like form in the desert who is dragged amongst the living. The “Dead Father” is a burden, violently inept and embarrassing, but his presence is inescapable: “Overall length, 3,200 cubits. Half buried in the ground, half not. At work ceaselessly night and day through all the hours for the good of all. He controls the hussars. Controls the rise, fall, and flutter of the market. Controls what Thomas is thinking, what Thomas has always thought, what Thomas will ever think” (Barthelme, *The Dead Father*, 4). As Wes Chapman argues of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, *The Dead Father* is dominated by “a kind of masculinist gigantism” which self-consciously “reveals its own absurdity” and yet can do no more than gesture toward a position outside the overwhelming “anxiety about being a male subject in a society in which male subjectivity has been identified as a problem” (par. 17, 2). At the same time, the son is scripted into the compulsory productivity that the father lived by—“At work ceaselessly night and day through all the hours”—but he works with the full knowledge that he is a diminished figure in relation to that labor.

The work itself, of course, is a changed thing for the last quarter of the twentieth century. By most accounts, 1973 marked the end of the postwar
“boom.” While consumerism and the finance industry continued to grow, at least in the advanced economies of the world, general economic growth was slowed down by such elements as the shortage of raw materials and the rise in unemployment. The further elaboration of the already existent division of labor, particularly in the United States, led to visible breakdowns and delays and increased worker isolation. At the same time, the world—and certainly the United States—witnessed the startlingly rapid growth of the information industry. The new technology no longer produced goods that could be touched and held but rather functioned to organize the increasingly mysterious—and increasingly more rapid—movement of capital. The largest material export from New York, significantly, came to be waste paper. In this context, the fictional recovery of the father’s productive status does understandably evoke the “endless, dreary discovery of Oedipus” that Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari argue marks late capitalist thought (20). Certainly in high postmodern fiction (like The Dead Father), the endemically capitalist compulsion to produce is turned toward the self-consciously production and reproduction of information in the self-consciously ironic name of pleasure and of the (dead) father.

The rape narrative is not lost in this revised account of white masculinity. In fact, to the contrary, heterosexual violence—now self-consciously narrated, ironically presented—is if anything more commonplace in high postmodern literature than in any other particular textual grouping. In the postmodern text, however, the prerogative for rape is often forcefully dissociated from masculine agency, and it is precisely the trauma of this dissociation that focuses the portrayal of masculinity. The rape dreams of an earlier vision of masculine productivity are confronted with the gradual disappearance of the rapably feminine. The raped and disappearing female body thus comes to constitute a denial; no longer promising subjectivity, it shows man his relationship to the techno-economy of late capitalism, and that relationship is revealed to be one that finally nullifies him as subject, spreads that hypothetical subjectivity across the information “space” that constitutes him. In the end the new white man is an exhausted information worker, consigned to a cubicle, detached from any understanding of the larger project of which he is (apparently) a part, producing under compulsion (in the clearly ideological name of pleasure) what does not have the palpable materiality of a “product.” There will be no inscription of masculine identity in this work or in sexual violence—not even a mark or a drop of blood to remind a tortured man of his own working subjection to the larger system. Rather, there is the growing recognition that the phallus has been usurped, and that the rape dreams of an older time have turned traitorously, masochistically, against the soft, vulnerable body of man himself.
First published in 1966, John Barth’s *Giles Goat-Boy* stages very early the kind of masculine anxiety that accompanied representations of the (perceived) metastatic growth of the techno-economy and its colonization of information flow. The masculine protagonist in the novel is explicitly secondary, “produced as a residuum alongside the machine,” doomed to a farcical reliving of the quest narrative; like the subject of late capitalism as described by Deleuze and Guattari, the hero “is not at the center, which is occupied by the machine, but on the periphery, with no fixed identity, forever decentered, defined by the states through which it passes” (20). George Giles’s restless attempt to establish the truth about himself in the midst of his own endless permutation thus self-consciously recycles the traditional salvific form in a campy retrieval—and thus simultaneous denial—of the classical masculine hero or savior. The antagonist in the plot is a corporate sentient machine, a computer that usurps masculine scripting but which, when confronted, metamorphoses into the mother body of sex, birth, and death. In an allegory of the cold war, the geography of the text is a world university divided into West and East branches. The split campus is controlled by a similarly split computer that has, in effect, imperialized all spaces and bodies, solidifying its power by perpetuating the cold war. The student body (or world population) is said to have been “eaten” to one degree or another by the mainframe, ingested into the machine and its lines of force. The antagonistic situation, then, against which the hero must work, is the (near) total “endo-colonization” of subjectivity effected by the computer—a territorialization through which it has acquired “organicity” (Kroker 39).

Further troubling to the heroic script is the fact that the computer’s power to colonize and/or manufacture subjectivity is achieved in large part through the assumption of the phallus. It is the computer’s “lust,” its expansion in the name of pleasure, which marks it as evil. Its power is acceptable when directed at goats—“WESCAC fastened upon the ewes it required and impregnated them in their stalls with what semen it chose,” while at the same time “running the whole College too, from teaching plane geometry to working out the payroll” (64). The one drawback—that the goat offspring are sterile—is overlooked. It is only when its (hetero)sexualized power is used in the manufacture of humans that the college administration is alerted—too late—to the danger of the computer’s powerful sentence. To the horror of all, its “Cum Laude” project comes to light, a eugenic plan to improve the human species through enforced technological insemination of female subjects with artificially manufactured sperm. George Giles narrates for Virginia Hector the moment of his own (hypothetical) conception in WESCAC’s control chair: “She had felt a kind of warmth, it seemed—penetrating, almost electrical—that tingled
through every limb and joint and relaxed her utterly, as though all the muscles in her body had melted. . . . her first thought was to move lest the tingling be some accidental radiation. But she did not, or could not, even when the whir changed pitch and timbre, grew croonish, and a scanner swung noiselessly down before her; even when, as best I could make out, the general warmth commenced to focus, until she'd thought her lap must burn" (492). Thus the raped female body comes to articulate and embody for her male audience of academics a human society of soft masses—"opaque amnesic social matter" (Kroker 79)—that is without firm substance, without volition, defined by its actual and psychological rapability. The prerogative for rape, at the same time, has been shifted from man to machine.

As in Lolita, then, the heterosexual masculine script is—from the beginning this time—detached from the “natural” masculine body: the questing knight is fathered by a computer, raised in a pen of computer-manufactured goats. It is the determination to reestablish the connection between “natural” and “masculinity” that motivates the action of the novel. George Giles’s quest is to accomplish those tasks that will prove that he is the Grand Tutor, the salvational figure destined to deliver mankind. The particular tasks he is assigned, however, including most centrally the directive to “See Through Your Ladyship,” prove ultimately unattainable (615). The novel thus narrates—this time in epic length and style—a stripping away of veils as frantic, endless, and ironic as Menelaus’s struggle to reach “naked Helen.” And echoing the violent desperation with which Humbert Humbert fantasizes of “turn[ing] my Lolita inside out and apply[ing] voracious lips to her young matrix, her unknown heart, her nacreous liver, the sea-grapes of her lungs, her comely twin kidneys” (167), Giles Goat-Boy has George view Anastasia through a “fluoroscope,” thus observing—without satisfaction and in fact with some revulsion—her “dark bones and dusky organs,” her “duodenum,” her “right and left kidneys,” and her “ovaries” (615). Once again, then, masculinity is structured uneasily upon the question of what the female body can be forced to reveal, and what that body reveals turns out to be “beyond our comprehension and control”: “disorder, not order, emerges at the end of the quest [, . . . collapsing] hope for any truth whatsoever” (Safer 93). True to the processes of fetishistic disavowal, however, the quest to “See Through Your Ladyship” is maintained nonetheless, with increasingly brutal violence directed against that female body. The narrative itself relates the repeated rape and brutalization of Anastasia as the “[q]uintessential rapee, an absolutely unselfish martyr” sacrificed to the cause of masculinity’s redemption from technological domination (537).

At the same time, Giles Goat-Boy marks a development in postmodern
thought whereby the unquenchable desire to consume—articulated by heterosexual rape—is supplanted by (even as it works to conceal) the compulsion to work. In fact the scope of the postmodern epic alone suggests restless productivity (in the name of pleasure)—productivity defined as relentless symbol manipulation, flexible organization of data, and information processing, the types of labor required for the successful management of a global economy (du Gay 68). As is common in this type of novel, a restless (and seemingly endless) hermeneutic process self-consciously dominates Giles Goat-Boy. The ongoing task of the protagonist is to ascertain authenticity and establish truth, yet in a process thoroughly absurdist and always without substance. In the midst of the “endless tapes” that Giles composes, these “cycles on cycles” composed in “detention,” is the clear recognition that his efforts are secondary to and in the service of the (raping) machine he thought he could subdue (through rape) (699).

At a physical level, one of his central tasks has been to enter the belly of the computer (illegitimately) and reprogram its aim: in other words, to feminize a threateningly masculine technology in a symbolic rape that supplants its sentience with Giles's own through a reprogramming of software. The exchange, however, has depleted only him: “Sudden or slow, we lose. The bank exacts its charge for each redistribution of our funds. There is an entropy to time, a tax on change: four nickels for two dimes, but always less silver; our books stay reconciled, but who in modern terms can tell heads from tails?” (707). In an economy that redistributes funds—codes, programs, tapes, information—under cover of fantastical sexual violence and desire, phallic initiative is ever more forcefully dissociated from masculine agency.

In the end George Giles is an exhausted information worker, consigned to a cubicle, detached from any understanding of the larger project of which he is (apparently) a part, producing what does not have the palpable materiality of a “product.” Troubled by “pains in both my legs, my goatly seizures, my errors of fact and judgement, my failures of resolve,” Giles is compelled to narrate the story of his life—“unwind, rewind, replay”—in words that lack significance to him: “For me, Sense and Nonsense lost their meaning on a night twelve years four months ago, in WESCAC’s Belly—as did every such distinction, including that between Same and Different” (699–700). The perspective is suggestive of Deborah Madsen’s description of the postmodern subject in relation to an information economy that in its ephemerality and seemingly random fluctuations remains essentially unknowable: “The postmodern market (especially a global market) is just too extensive and complex to allow for total understanding. Its purpose cannot be predicted or planned for; its fluctuations cannot be specified in advance; its results do not become apparent imme-
diately but are confused by a complex network of causes and effects and chance as well” (148). Imprisoned by the woman whose spectacular rapes have punctuated the text, George not only reflects on his fruitless quests to establish Truth but contemplates the possibility that he has long since been “EATen” by one of the dueling computers, his informational processes thus (re?)configured to be, although meaningless to him, in direct service to a larger System, the binary oppositions of which (including not only his own favored ethical binaries but the cold war itself) function only to maintain the status quo: “Not impossibly dear Anastasia was a little EATen herself . . . ; not impossibly I was too, either in infancy or in one or more of my descents into the Belly. How would I know? Not impossibly . . . all studentsdom was EATen terms ago—by WESCAC, EASCAC, or both—and its fear of Campus Riot III is but one ironic detail of a mad collective dream” (700). The complete erosion of human agency George Giles portrays echoes Jean Baudrillard’s assertions concerning the fate of subjectivity in post-capitalist American culture. Stephen Dougherty describes Baudrillard’s oddly exuberant vision:

All our thoughts and actions once attributable to free human spirit are suddenly discovered to be programmed. The consequences of this collapse of multidimensionality, as Baudrillard suggests, are indeed catastrophic: “The whole traditional mode of causality is brought into question: the perspective, determinist mode, the ‘active,’ critical mode, the analytic mode—the distinction between cause and effect, between active and passive, between subject and object, between ends and means.” The classical world of referentiality passes away along with the very ground for authentic human agency, and the one-dimensional world of the referendum and the “mystic elegance of the binary sign system, of the zero and the one,” emerges in its place. (12)

This image of a monolithic and sentient information economy—a structure that manufactures and contains subjectivity at the same time that it blocks human attempts to reconfigure it—is precisely the paradigm that structures cyberpunk, that outgrowth of science fiction self-described as “the integration of technology and Eighties counterculture” (Sterling xii). As power is concentrated in *Giles Goat-Boy* in the belly of the computer, in cyberpunk power manifests itself in the non-space of cyberspace, the information “space” that plots via database and computer network the moving configurations of global capitalism. Except for the renegade hacker—whose access is unlawful—humans are excluded from this information space and are relegated to the marginalized “real” space of the text, an
almost entirely dystopian geography of decayed urban sprawl, commodification, and ethnic violence. The hacker himself thus works to (re)establish the persona of cowboy/pirate/inventor/entrepreneur on the surface of the hyperreal. In Nicola Nixon’s words, the cyberhero rejuvenates the “American icon of the cowboy, realized so strongly in Reaganite cowboyism, the quintessence of the maverick reactionary” (224). The antagonist against whom the reactionary must react is cyberspace itself, as well as the business interests that are its distant source, the “collective, domesticated, feminized” Japanese megacorporations that deny individualist achievement (Nixon 224). The hacker’s enemy is thus also and at the same time the venue for his heroism. The transnational megacorporations control and kill almost entirely in and through their techno-informational forms, but it is also in this incarnation that they can be penetrated, destroyed, and/or impregnated with a new message. As in the farcical Giles Goat-Boy, then, minus the farce, masculinist identity is in cyberpunk potentially (re)inscribed through productive violence on the feminized corporate/informational body; the rapability of that body recursively enables this gesture—and promises that there is yet an ideological alternative to the gritty consumerism of the “real” world.

In cyberpunk fiction generally, cyberspace is almost always explicitly feminized, and the cyberhero “enters” it with fully phallic connotation, as in this “logging on” scene from Neal Stephenson’s Snow Crash: “Hiro could only think it was like nuzzling through skirts and lingerie and outer labia and inner labia. . . . It made him feel naked and weak and brave” (23). Once “in,” Hiro straps on virtual swords and rides a virtual motorcycle. The phallic construction of cyberidentity is often tinged with violence, as Bob Donahoo points out in the context of a discussion of a logging on scene from Gibson’s “Burning Chrome”; the event, Donahoo claims, is “metaphorically made equivalent to rape” and reveals a form of “female-bashing” directed against “the female who has dared to cross the boundary into the male power hierarchy” (155). The subjectivity thus defined through the resuscitation of the cowboy persona, however, is as vulnerable as it is implicitly violent (“naked and weak and brave”). The masculine cybersubject rides on the back of a technology only temporarily mastered. The hero’s identity is established through phallic projection, and that projection takes him “outside himself.” When he opens his eyes on the other side of the looking glass, he finds that he is enclosed in an apparently vast and feminine body of information; the suggestion is thus that he might be crushed, bitten, eaten, or infected with disease at any moment. He must move quickly, sharply, aggressively and then get out: his successful action can be no more than a renegade foray into the hyperreal. The climactic moment of most cyberfiction involves a fast-paced
operation in which the hero must break into a file and escape with his prize before he is “fried” or “frozen” by some intrusion countermeasure program that has the capability of following him out of cyberspace and back into his own organic brain. Like Dougherty’s description of viral coding, cyberspace is the “postorganic . . . terrifying, mechanical what that threatens to displace the sacred who of organic autonomous selfhood”—and threatens to do so by virtue of the penetrability that defines the hacker himself (10).

The specifically humanoid cybervillains within cyberspace are as feminized as is the matrix that houses them. The antagonist of Gibson’s Neuromancer, for example, is 3Jane. Stephenson’s Snow Crash is troubled by the Snow Crash virus, which affects human mind and computer alike—can, in fact, infect the organic brain through the medium of the metaverse. The virus attacks language and coding, reducing computers to inoperability and, more importantly in the novel, inducing in humans a permanent aphasia. Snow Crash reawakens a common primitive language of the deep structure of the brain, a nonreferential language and a discursive space that, unlike the metaverse (when uninfected), disallows the agency implicit in higher brain functions by negating the possibility of reference: “Under the right conditions, your ears—or eyes—can tie into deep structures, bypassing the higher language functions. Which is to say, someone who knows all the right words can speak words, or show you visual symbols, that go past all your defenses and sink right into your brainstem. Like a cracker who breaks into a computer system, bypasses all the security precautions, and plugs himself into the core, enabling him to exert absolute control over the machine” (369). Like 3Jane, the Snow Crash virus threatens the information space that is fictionalized in cyberpunk as the final stage upon which subjectivity is enacted. The feminine infection promises to glut with mindless repetition the perpetual and restless movement of information capital, a nonspatial roiling that might otherwise be imagined as a new frontier. In both cases, the damage is accomplished through viral reproduction: endless replications of the genetic code that call to mind Baudrillard’s “gigantic simulacrum” of God—not unreal, but a simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference” (Simulacra 1736). Dougherty has drawn the connection between Baudrillard’s simulacra and popular obsession with viral infection generally; the virus speaks to the contemporary sense that “all our thoughts and actions once attributable to free human spirit are suddenly discovered to be programmed”: “In an age of simulation the virus is the perfect monster with which to frighten ourselves. It is a copy without an original; it is information without context, and thus without meaning; it is beyond representation” (11,
9–10). In spite of the otherwise euphoric representations of the freedom and mobility enabled by information “space,” the revelation of the groundlessness and self-generation of that information disallows the possibility of autonomous action.

Ironically, it is when femininity enters the process of genetic replication—the precession of the simulacra—that reference, and thus agency, is most explicitly threatened. The extent to which 3Jane controls cyberspace is the extent to which cyberspace is potentially lethal. Similarly, in *Snow Crash* the danger of the primal common language is never escaped by virtue of the fact that Asherah, mother goddess and cult of prostitutes, has struggled throughout the ages to preserve the virus that accesses and unleashes that “mother tongue” (373). Reminiscent of both the herpes simplex virus and HIV, as David Porush points out, the virus is kept viable through “the exchange of bodily fluids” (566):

Asherah is both a biological and a computer or informational virus. Herpes simplex heads straight for the nervous system and affects the brainstem. It’s both biological and eventually mental . . . coiling around the brainstem like a serpent around a tree . . . brings the mother tongue closer to the surface, makes people more apt to speak in tongues and more susceptible [. . .] maybe lowers the victim’s defenses to viral ideas . . .

We are all susceptible to the pull of viral ideas, like mass hysteria [and] . . . Bart Simpson t-shirts and bell bottom jeans and Nazism . . . No matter how smart we get, there is always this deep irrational part that makes us potential hosts for self-replicating information. (Stephenson 373)

Porush argues persuasively that in the “metahistory” of *Snow Crash* it is the (masculine) invention of the Torah that “played a role in preserving civilization from Asherah”: “Judaism and its primary invention, the Torah, represented a successful countercult promoting ‘informational hygiene’ and using a counter- or good virus, a namshub. Many Jewish sages themselves argue that one of the most fundamental tenets of Judaism is to ‘build a wall around the Torah,’ a *cordon sanitaire*” (566). The information space that centers and preserves Judaic culture must like cyberspace be protected from the feminized virus that not only returns language to its essentially nonreferential nature but penetrates and kills the (male) user, infecting him stealthily in the midst of an act illusorily perceived as his active penetration of a feminized other.

The general tendency to vilify feminine presence in the machine is rarely contradicted in cyberpunk fiction. Characters like Angie Mitchell,
Gibson’s simstim star, seem only at first to complicate this oppressively
gendered vision. In the case of Angie Mitchell, for example, the character
does in fact have access to the matrix and is not presented as malignant:
Gibson constructs her instead as a fairytale princess of the other king-
dom—the bride of the prince. The difference between Angie and 3Jane,
however, is that Angie has not penetrated the matrix; she has not project-
ed herself anywhere, nor has she written software into cyberspace. On the
contrary, her access to the matrix is a function of that access having been
written into her body by her father in the form of a microchip planted in
her brain. She is, in fact, a source of infinite access for others; as a simstim
star, her sensations, thoughts, and feelings—are appropriately enhanced and
censored—are publicly available for mass consumption. She is equally
open to the forms that inhabit the matrix. These voodoo-inspired beings
violently rip their way into her consciousness—without warning and
against her will—leaving her physically bleeding, mentally beaten, and fig-
uratively impregnated with their message. Similarly, her link to cyberspace
itself is almost always represented as a penetration of her mind from the
outside. Like Mona, whose body is surgically altered against her will to
resemble Angie’s, she can be written on and her life and self are chronically
scripted. In short, she is less a player in the matrix than she is an uncom-
plicated extension of it. As Nicola Nixon argues in another context, “the
cowboys have to ‘interface’ with the matrix through ‘slotting into’ femi-
nized cyberspace decks; certain females, however, require no such media-
tion: they are already, by implication, a part of it” (227).

Angie, then, is not a threat and cannot bite; equally benign are those
female figures who are not “a part of” the matrix but who serve as
metaphorical stand-ins for the passive terrain of uninfected cyberspace.
These are the sidekicks, the help-meets who serve as physical buffer zones
for the hero. Molly, for example, Gibson’s “razor-girl” in the Sprawl trilo-
gy, is a character who has virtually no access to the Internet or to informa-
tion space generally; she is all mechanically enhanced physical power.
However, her enhanced body serves nonetheless as a simulation and exten-
sion of the matrix that she herself cannot or will not access. Molly has been
the subject of more than one feminist revision: both Kathy Acker and Pat
Cadigan have rewoven her person into their own fiction, struggling with
what becomes in Neuromancer her core characteristic—her figurative and
actual rapability. In this novel, Molly and Case, the computer cowboy,
have been hired to break into a closely guarded corporate headquarters and
steal the Dixie Flatline, the taped personality construct of a dead hacker. It
becomes Molly’s job to make the actual physical break into the building;
Case “accompanies” and guides her through an electronically broadcast
neural link that gives him full access to her senses but gives her no access
to his. Two things are highlighted in the narration of this connection: Molly’s excruciating physicality, and Case’s ability to enter and withdraw from her point of view:

Case hit the simstim switch. And flipped into an agony of broken bone. Molly was braced against the blank gray wall of a long corridor, her breath coming ragged and uneven.

Case was back in the matrix instantly, a white-hot line of pain fading in his left thigh.

“What’s happening, Brood?” he asked the link man.

“I dunno, Cutter. Mother’s not talking. Wait.”

[ . . . ] Taking a deep breath, he flipped again.

Molly took a single step, trying to support her weight on the corridor wall. In the loft, Case groaned. The second step took her over an outstretched arm. Uniform sleeve bright with fresh blood. Glimpse of shattered fiberglass shockstave. Her vision seemed to have narrowed to a tunnel. With the third step, Case screamed and found himself back in the matrix. (64)

“Mother” doesn’t talk in this scene; she is all (mutilated and mutilating) flesh, all pain, and the words in her head are all Case’s. The electronic link makes her body—like computer “space”—infinitely hollow, accessible, and usable; Molly is the technologically enhanced prosthesis that enables the latter-day cowboy to penetrate the corporate (techno)hymen and claim his rightful heritage—the remains or “soul” of his “father.”

Both Brian McHale and Claire Sponsler find in Angie’s and Molly’s penetrability signs of an ultimately enabling postmodern rejection of autonomous identity. In fact, McHale singles out Case’s neural interface with Molly’s brain in *Neuromancer* as representative of a kind of postmodern and schizophrenic “multiple-point-of-view fiction” (260). It seems to me that this access resembles “schizophrenia” only superficially; its viability works rather to reintroduce—through images of gender violence—the grounded agency of white masculinity in the face of a potentially disorienting scene. Molly’s penetrability is unidirectional: Case can penetrate or withdraw from Molly’s mind; she has little access to his. He is described as “riding” Molly’s augmented body, a body thus constructed as subject to outside penetration and modification, not stable and autonomous as is his own. She is trapped in a panoptic material world; his terrain enables movement even as it shields him from outside view. In the final analysis, Molly’s body functions protectively to carve a physical space for the productive agency of the masculine subject within the virtualism of a post-Fordist era, to make him again the master of the machine. She makes it
possible to believe that this “new world that has escaped from the gravitational pull of the real,” as Dougherty puts it, is also and at the same time that old world of the Magna Mater, the original matrix (11).

Feminist revisions of Gibson critique both the sexual politics of this MacKinnonian construction of woman as penetrability and the illusory reconstruction of masculine productivity in the face of the networked intricacies of finance capitalism: the information worker with cowboy dreams. In Cadigan’s Synners, the central female character experiences a socket interface, an experience similar to Molly’s neural link, which is explicitly described as a rape. At the same time, the male hacker-protagonist is eventually and brutally absorbed into the matrix, where he is figuratively “raped” by his own electronic echo.3 No one emerges triumphant and autonomous. Kathy Acker goes further yet. In her rewrite of the Molly-Case scene in Empire of the Senseless, she destabilizes the violent narratives of masculine identity formation by continually foregrounding not only the brutality but also the self-serving fantasy involved in Molly/Abhor’s subjection. Ultimately Abhor, the possessed body that is “half black, half robot,” turns on Thivai/Case just long enough to articulate his dependence on her subjection: “‘You’re what I make you,’ Abhor said” (42). Acker breaks the narrative coherence of the Molly-Case interface as well, always deemphasizing precisely what Gibson highlights: the ease with which Case’s technology penetrates Molly and Molly’s reality as an entirely separate and corporeal “other.” Thus, there are no references in Acker to “flipping” or “jacking”; Case/Thivai merely “sees” things from the outside of the feminine body. He is thus stripped of his penetrative initiative, and as Abhor’s body fades into a thing of “seeming,” the “mottled bruises” of Gibson (70) fading into “blue purple and green patches which looked like bruises but weren’t” (Acker, Empire of the Senseless, 33), Thivai is thrust back into the echoing halls of narcissism (the same place where Cadigan’s hacker-protagonist is figuratively raped and killed). His “other” is taken away from him and replaced by a “construct” (34).

Acker’s revision of Gibson thus reveals that the gender violence folded within hero formation is a fantasy of man as a subject-effect, locked in, dreaming his rape dreams in what is primarily a gesture of narcissism. The hero is allowed his violence, then, but is more emasculated by it than otherwise. Like Tarr, like Gerald Crich, Thivai is finally closed in by technology, and what he thought would be a mechanical and savage phallus ends up more of a prison than a projectile—a prison that reminds him constantly of his own secondary status in relation to a larger System: right before he confronts the (seemingly) brutalized robot body of Abhor, Thivai says, “I, whoever I was, was going to be a construct” (33). Acker’s pirate, then, unlike the pirates and cowboys of cyberspace, articulates what Hari
Kunzru argues is “[t]he general shift from thinking of individuals as isolated from the ‘world’ to thinking of them as nodes on networks.” Similarly, Donna Haraway writes that “the actual situation” for the contemporary human subject is “integration/exploitation” into a global communications system she terms “the informatics of domination,” which is in turn responsible for coding, among other things, “the systems of myth and meanings structuring our imaginations” (163). Cyberpunk fiction envisions in “the extreme mobility of capital” the corollary dream of the extreme (and purposeful) mobility of the masculine subject; it thus falls prey to the allure of “[t]he new communications technologies . . . that promise ultimate mobility and perfect exchange” (168). Haraway argues that in point of fact, the capitalism of an information age renders “[w]hite men in advanced industrial societies . . . newly vulnerable,” “feminized”: “able to be disassembled, reassembled, exploited as a reserve labour force; seen less as workers than as servers; subjected to time arrangements on and off the paid job that make a mockery of a limited work day; leading an existence that always borders on being obscene” (168, 166). The all-too-visible, vulnerable body of the hacker in the fiction of Cadigan and Acker thus reconnects the self “in” cyberspace to the economic realities of information capitalism, reworking a genre that conceals—at any cost—the extent to which computer work is still work, the information worker still a worker, in service to a larger corporate system. E. L. McCallum makes the case that the pirate hacker of writers like Gibson and Stephenson is symptomatic of a profound ideological misrecognition of the late capitalist function of cyberspace: “the outlaws and cowboys are the ones who by their hacking talent, data piracy, and tribalist manifestos protest the corporate settlement of the Internet frontier; however, this angle serves to gloss over the shift of the real map of the Internet, from primarily a military-academic network in the 1970s and 1980s to a commercial opportunity cashed in on by barons like Sun Microsystems, Netscape, and American Online in the 1990’s” (371–72). Cyberpunk fiction focuses tenaciously on the flickering masculine figure so seemingly disconnected from the screen on which he is projected.

In postmodern fiction more generally, anxieties about the fate of traditionally defined white, middle-class masculinity proliferate more openly, and chief amongst those are the fears that speak to the opaque relationship between corporate capitalism and the male subject. David Savran argues that in a world where “the heroics of John Wayne [have become] embarrassingly out of place,” where labor has become bureaucratized, capitalism service oriented, military might displaced by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, it has become “all the more urgent that the masculine fantasmatic be reconstructed to bear the unmistakable traces of
a robust, independent, and entrepreneurial masculinity” (194). For Savran, “reflexive sadomasochism” has become the “linchpin” in these “fantasmatic” negotiations (190). Sadism articulates the force and point of an earlier white masculinity, and yet now turns against itself in a gesture of masochism that speaks to the feminized role of the new (middle-class) male worker. Savran argues that there is nothing particularly novel about this construction of white masculinity; it was first identified, in fact, by Freud: “The only thing truly new about the new narcissist (or new sadomasochist—take your pick) is that he represents a now dominant figure on the U.S. cultural scene, no longer relegated to the margins” (169). In a culture and economy whose ability to identify an other to dominate either legitimately or effectively became increasingly problematic, “the relatively stable masculinity of the domestic revival was thrown into crisis,” and “the male subject began to turn against himself and to prove his mettle by gritting his teeth and taking his punishment like a man” (176). The rape dreams of an earlier vision of masculine identity, by the same token, are gradually and masochistically redirected inward toward the new, feminized male body.

Nicholson Baker’s *The Fermata* turns precisely on this shift from phallic identification to phallic victimhood. *The Fermata* is a fantastical novel about a male “temp” who has the ability to stop time on command. Arnold Strine is thus the nomadic office worker of late capitalism, floating from one menial information job to the next, while yet living a (semi)private fantasy of renegade power. What Arnold Strine generally does during these periods when he is in the “fermata,” the fold, when everyone and everything else resembles nothing so much as dead matter, is work. He writes; he transcribes; he processes information in a variety of ways. The work he produces, however, at the cost of premature aging, is effaced, almost completely masked by a seemingly outlaw, transgressive (hetero)sexuality that perpetually borders on rape. The violation to which he is addicted generally involves the undressing of women and moves increasingly toward some type of sexual intervention in their consciousness. Significantly, then, the “technology” of the time trick not only allows Arnold to self-identify as “serenely unproductive,” but lifts him out of a private world of alienated labor and masturbation and offers him the opportunity of reciprocally inscribing his (masculine) identity on a passive, feminine field (101). Like the pirates of cyberspace, he acts as if he and the machine are one; he is in control of the universal pause/play button, and thus is the master through his “rape-like acts” of the unfathomable interiors of the Mater/matrix (91). The power of the voyeuristic gaze is only illusorily identified with play/pause technology, however: his “raping game” is always negotiated by some form of actual or figurative prosthesis, his penis never actually penetrating flesh. The narrative drive, then, is all about the
dream of transforming narcissism into binarism, masturbation into unidirectional penetration—but the power to go from the former to the latter is not dependable, and the tables, ultimately, can be turned. Ironically, then, Arnold is led closer and closer to his own feminization and objectification through the very growth in violence and aggressivity that would seem to promise the reinstatement of masculine force.

The narrator confesses in the beginning of his “autobiography” that watching the frozen bodies in the fermata is not enough in itself: “I love looking at women. I love being able to see them clearly. I particularly like being in the position I am in this very second,” having his boss frozen in front of him, her dress pulled up over her waist and her nylons pulled down around her ankles (8). The voyeuristic gaze, then, which draws ever closer to the frozen (or dead) female body, parting its coverings in order to stare ever more deeply into its orifices, is clearly more active than it represents itself—and never the “harmless” position that Arnold constantly claims. He feels compelled to act on the observed body, so that he not only watches a woman bathe and masturbate, for example, but also ejaculates in her face, starting time again briefly so that she will feel that something is amiss. It is thus “the fact of invasion,” as Arthur Saltzman points out, that is “crucial to arousal” and not “a hormonal focus per se” (Understanding Nicholson Baker 89). Strine self-consciously assures the reader in such scenes that all is well, all is harmless: actual penile penetration has not occurred. Invisibility validates, and the narrator has used the invisible prosthesis of time control, ultimately a phallic power that resembles in practice Case’s “jacking” into Molly. Arnold begins to feel excluded, however, by the narcissism and solitude of what is increasingly experienced as a necrophilic aura, and so begins to insinuate himself into the unknowing woman’s consciousness, thus becoming increasingly visible. In one of his periods in the fold, for example, he follows a woman from the library to her bus, then inserts a vibrating butterfly into her vulva, “gradually increasing its flutter level . . . over a series of six or seven time-perversions” until she has an orgasm, taking care to make eye contact with her at this point. He hands her the vibrator in an envelope when they reach her stop. The voyeur thus becomes the rapist in postmodern retreat, engaging in what would under normal circumstances be fantasy but with the aid of “technology” becomes here actual power over the (feminine) world: “the world is inert and statuesque until I touch it and make it live ordinarily” (13).

A huge part of the novel is given over to the pornography that Arnold writes and slips unobtrusively to women in fold time. His work, then, mirrors the fantastical prerogative enabled by the fermata: to make the private visible. Pornography, according to Jean Baudrillard, like the obscenity of
late capitalist culture generally, functions to “let everything be produced, be read, become real, visible” (Forget Foucault 21). Further, for Baudrillard, that absolute visibility is produced under “the sign of effectiveness”: “let everything be transcribed into force relations, into conceptual systems or into calculable energy” (21). Arnold Strine’s invisibility is matched by his work of pornographic revelation, a specularity transformed into penetrative power over women. He watches them read (or listen, in the case of taped pornography), and then follows them in order to determine the effect he has had, hoping to have aroused sexual interest. Evidence of feminine sexual arousal—imagined or not—becomes the occasion for visions of absolute physical penetration: “I fancied that she was breathing a little faster than she would have been if my words hadn’t just gone through her mind. I was in her mind. There were things about what she read that she didn’t like, or that seemed dumb to her, but even so it was working on her and making her want to go home” (144). His “work”—although eating away at his own life expectancy—is thus conceived as the invasion and transformation of the frozen female body through discourse; her figurative emptiness enables him to think of himself not only as a subject with effect but as writing subject, the master of discourse who through the techne of scripture can liberate the feminine body into health. His vulnerable role as temporary office worker is thus rewritten as data pirate, rapist cowboy; he is the classic cyberhero who “jacks” into feminized information space and there reconfigures himself on the surface of the hyperreal as Lady Chatterley’s late-capitalist lover.

As pornography is configured in Baudrillard’s conception to render everything visible, however, so is Arnold himself finally subjected to the specularizing force over which he has felt ownership. In the end, the machine turns on Arnold and becomes the property of a female successor. The transference is figured as a castration: his “technique” for accessing the fermata is sucked out of him with a penis pump, transferred to a dildo, and given to Joyce (significantly, Arnold’s former boss). Arnold is himself now the body that might be invaded without his will or knowledge; his is the consciousness now vulnerable to the rape of the word. As Alice Jardine puts it of postmodern man generally, “It is almost as if technique, as concept and practice, has turned Man into an Object-Woman” (75). Just before he loses his power, in fact, Arnold finds himself a part of a scientific project to determine the effect of masturbation on carpal tunnel syndrome (a study, in other words, that examines the potentially harmful effects of minimalist sexual pleasure on the productive body of the low-level office worker). He is placed inside the “vaginal” core of a superconducting magnet, his penis is painted with reference points, and he is shot through with X rays while his masturbation is observed by powerful
women in white coats. The emotional drive of the scene is derived from the sense of control Arnold maintains, unaware of his ludicrously extreme vulnerability. He has moved full circle from voyeur to exhibitionist, and it is his body that is treated as object, shot through with the invisible bullets of twentieth-century technology.

In many ways, Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* turns similarly on the shift from masculine identification with phallic power to masculine vulnerability to the technological phallus. Eroticized violence again mediates the troubled relationship between man and the late-capitalist machine. Set late in the London blitz and in the postwar transnational European “zone,” *Gravity’s Rainbow* follows the reverse trajectory of the German V-2 rocket—in a sense establishing the rocket as the central image onto which, as David Porush puts it, “Each character in the book maps some portion of his or her desire” (130). The central feature of the rocket that thus dominates the text—through desire and fear—is its phallic violence: for the engineers who design it, it is “[b]eyond simple steel erection[;] the Rocket was an entire system won, away from the feminine darkness, held against the entropies of lovable but scatterbrained Mother Nature” (324). Wes Chapman makes the case that Pynchon’s phallic rockets reveal the ways in which the modern (or postmodern) state “sexualize[s] the machinery of death” according to the masculinist code of “dominance and submission”: “Hence the grotesque eroticism of the Rocket: ‘fifty feet high, trembling . . . and then the fantastic, virile roar . . . Cruel, hard, thrusting into the virgin-blue robes of the sky . . . Oh, so phallic’” (qtd. in par. 9). The V-2 is thus proof and extension of an essentially phallic and reified masculine subjectivity, and in the privacy of the engineer’s mind, as Joseph Tabbi has pointed out, man is the one who exerts control over it, setting upon its brute mass and “fettering” it to his own electronic and mechanical designs. The engineer’s dream of flight and force is integrated into the rocket’s own device of in-flight guidance, and that phallic dream culminates in the mysterious quintuple zero, the V-2 that carries a living man inside it, literally integrating the rocket with the masculine self.

On the other hand, the rocket also maps the terrain of human—specifically masculine—vulnerability. Tyrone Slothrop is described as staring up at the sky in London, his penis erect, wondering if he is at ground zero, aware of all of his orifices open in terror and expectation. The rocket thus renders man rapable, feminized—appropriates the traditionally masculine prerogative for sexual violence. In its cool distillation of phallic will and agency, rocket technology usurps for itself the ground of Western subjectivity. In pornographic ascent and eroticized descent, the rocket is always masculine, and man is relegated finally to the irreducibly other, “reduced”
by the “The Force” to “human puppetry” (J. Chambers 69). In spite of its domination by violent phallic imagery, then, *Gravity’s Rainbow* stages the troubled status of Euro-American masculinity in the twentieth century. The absorption of masculine agent into the military-corporate machine, furthermore, becomes most clearly recognizable in the powerful current of sexual violence that runs through the novel. The scenes and images of rape and sexual sadism initiate the traumatic disappearance of the feminine—the enabling feminine “other” whose rapability otherwise promises masculine agency. At the apex of the rocket’s path, when it hangs between phallic thrust and phallic plunging descent, is the moment of Brennenschuss, burn-off, absolute zero. Brennenschuss is the moment at which “the Rocket’s purely feminine counterpart, the zero point at the center of its target, has submitted” (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 223)—has been raped, undone, made to disappear. At this point, the rocket enters into indeterminacy. That the feminine or feminized target has ceased to exist has stopped the game. For Pynchon, Brennenschuss is non-relationship, the place where the binary twists on its axis and where gender and its corollary—Western subjectivity—become unthinkable.

Baudrillard maintains that every discourse is threatened with this sudden reversibility—absorption into its own signs without a trace of meaning (*Seduction* 2). For Baudrillard, this absorption is precipitated by the death of seduction, “the degree zero of structure.” Pynchon clearly plays at mourning a similarly abstract loss; the mythical moment when desire, lust, and dominance, all markers in this text of white masculine subjectivity, are recognized as originating not in the male subject per se but in the larger system. The violent eroticization of the female body thus ultimately fails to authorize masculine agency, even in ironic terms: somewhere between the propulsion and the descent, gravity intervenes; the woman disappears. Margherita Erdmann, for example, acknowledges herself the “Anti-Dietrich: not destroyer of men but doll—languid, exhausted,” as if recognizing her own symbolic bankruptcy within a masculinist text: “I watched all our films,” she recalls, “some of them six or seven times. I never seemed to move. Not even my face. . . . it could have been the same frame, over and over” (394). Slothrop’s sexual desire for Margherita is aptly focused less on her body as female body than on her plasticity, the “silver memory of her body on film,” which is conjured even in real time through the isolation and examination of her “[h]eavy legs in silk stockings shining now with a hard, machined look,” the “singular point at the top of a lady’s stocking,” which calls to mind in turn the mathematical aura of bifurcating railroad ties, and “the A4 pointed at the sky—just before the last firing-switch closes” (395–96). His sexual desire for her turns toward the machine, and toward the military-industrial complex, and resolves itself in the “The Force” to “human puppetry” (J. Chambers 69). In spite of its domination by violent phallic imagery, then, *Gravity’s Rainbow* stages the troubled status of Euro-American masculinity in the twentieth century. The absorption of masculine agent into the military-corporate machine, furthermore, becomes most clearly recognizable in the powerful current of sexual violence that runs through the novel. The scenes and images of rape and sexual sadism initiate the traumatic disappearance of the feminine—the enabling feminine “other” whose rapability otherwise promises masculine agency. At the apex of the rocket’s path, when it hangs between phallic thrust and phallic plunging descent, is the moment of Brennenschuss, burn-off, absolute zero. Brennenschuss is the moment at which “the Rocket’s purely feminine counterpart, the zero point at the center of its target, has submitted” (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 223)—has been raped, undone, made to disappear. At this point, the rocket enters into indeterminacy. That the feminine or feminized target has ceased to exist has stopped the game. For Pynchon, Brennenschuss is non-relationship, the place where the binary twists on its axis and where gender and its corollary—Western subjectivity—become unthinkable.

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a parodied echo of the gang rape committed during the filming of *Alpdrucken*, Slothrop fumbling through the old “inquisitional props” from the filming of the movie, an inept Grand Inquisitor and a “surrogate” co-star (396–97).

Wes Chapman argues persuasively that the violent and demeaning sexuality of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, all the sadomasochism and pornography, speak to a “deflection” of male (naturalized as human) sexuality “to an economy of objectified images” that serve specifically to manufacture masculine subjectivity “at the micropolitical level” (par. 10, 11). The novel, Chapman argues, thus stages a critique of the ways in which the contemporary state “sexualize[s] the machinery of death” through a “masculinist coding of sexuality such that all its citizens will respond sexually to a scenario of dominance and submission” (par. 10). Masculine sexuality, in other words—particularly in relation to sadism and to pornography—is a function of the corporate-military system of the novel and is constructed to serve and extend that system. Chapman points to Pirate Prentice’s reception of his military orders—via rocket—as an example. The message is written in “Kryptosam,” a chemical developed by IG Farben, and reveals its contents only after exposure to seminal fluid. Thus, Pirate Prentice finds enclosed with his orders a drawing of an ex-girlfriend, pornographically posed and attired after a private fantasy he has never shared with anyone. His first response—as Slothrop’s often is—is to assume that “They” must have a “dossier” on him somewhere, must have “managed to monitor everything he saw and read since puberty” (72). The narrative itself undermines the authenticity Pirate thus scrambles to preserve through his paranoia: the setting is De Mille, the female body objectified in precisely the kinds of ways that speak to “every young man” who has grown up in England, each “conditioned to get a hardon in the presence of certain fetishes” (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 72). What he perceives as his innermost, privately known space is in fact the coded construction of the military-corporate state, and his body parts—including his “own robot hands”—function according to its will. Significantly, however, it is his own *productive* action that encodes him as an individual and individualized player within that state. What is in one sense consumption and reception—of the pornographic image, his orders, his own social script—relies heavily upon production—of tumescence, ejaculation, and seminal fluid. His physical, genital body is itself written upon even as it (re)writes the mission he will undertake in service of the military-industrial complex. By the same token, the discursive agency thus dismantled even as it is constructed is necessarily male, rendered functional and semicoherent only by seminal fluid.

Slothrop’s sadomasochistic scene with Margherita Erdmann evidences the same narrative recognition that violent, masculine sexuality operates in
the service of the state, as Chapman has pointed out: once he begins to
whip her, Slothrop discovers that “someone has already educated him’ in
the fine art of sexual cruelty” (par. 11). The “someone” is the same corpo-
rate-military “They” haunting the entire novel, always somehow before,
beneath, and all around the individual characters. “They” have already
programmed in Slothrop a taste for violent sexual dominance, and yet that
taste, once recognized and acted upon, is quickly incorporated into the
masculine self, as if naturally belonging there: “No. No—he still says
‘their,’ but he knows better. . . his own cruelty” (396). Thus the roots of
masculine identity are shifted to the corporation in the same gesture that
establishes the violent nature of masculine sexuality. The powerful agency
presumably expressed—and compulsively pursued—through sadism is
revealed by turns to be the carefully prescribed productive activity comp-
pelled by “Them” in the name of pleasure. “They want you here, right
now,” Margherita tells him (395). It is the half-hiddenness of this link that
generates the sense that there is something else lurking just beyond the
exertions of sexual violence and the fragmented, tortured female body:
“And what’s waiting for Slothrop, what unpleasant surprise, past the tops
of Greta’s stockings here? . . . What waits past this whine and crack of vel-
et lashes against her skin, long red stripes on the white ground, her
moans, the bruise-colored flower that cries at her breast, the jingling of the
hardware holding her down?” (397).

In oblique answer to Slothrop’s question, the scene is abruptly followed
by the echoes of violence that accompanied the original screening of the
rape scene in *Alpdrucken*. Like Slothrop, men in contact with the feminine
“silver . . . body on film” compulsively repeat the sadistic role Max
Schlepzig and the jackal men played in the film. “Everybody” left the Ufa
theater the night of the screening “thinking . . . only about getting home,
fucking somebody, fucking her into some submission” (397). Franz Pokler
is testament to the mass-produced power of the film and its presentation
of the Nazi “Anti-Dietrich”: he is “flooded with tonight’s image of the deli-
cious victim bound on her dungeon rack filling the movie screen”; the
image transforms his “solemn wife” into “Margherita Erdmann under-
neath him, on the bottom for a change. . . . yes, bitch, yes” (397).
Significantly, both Margherita Erdmann and Leni Pokler become preg-
nant, along with, Pokler supposes, multiple other women: “How many
shadow-children would be fathered on Erdmann that night?” (397). The
emphasis, aptly, is on (re)production. The film not only produces Nazis,
conditioned to “respond sexually to a scenario of dominance and submit-
sion” (Chapman par. 10); it so constructs the illusion of agency that the
violent masculine subject will produce more bodies for the Aryan home-
land. “Flooded” with the image of the “Reich’s Sweethearts,” the average
consumer is transformed into the actual living embodiment of Nazi ideology, lives the fascist ethic of hyperproductivity in the name of the fatherland. The viewers of Alpdrucke thus grimly parody the straight-faced calls to stepped-up (re)production voiced in The Cantos; here Ezra Pound’s mythologized celebration of sexual violence becomes a critique of the ways in which the military-corporate state constructs the masculine subject through attributions of generative violence and productive dominance. The power to rape is yet another scrap of footage in “Goebbels’s private collection” (461). The “shadow children” produced during and after the making of the film stand testament to the illusory nature of the agency that begot them, and their ghostlike presence haunts the “fathers” with visions of the merciless, inescapable violence to which they (the fathers) are consigned and which they wield only in service to Them.

The first Alpdrucken child is Bianca, daughter of Margherita Erdmann herself, conceived on the phony rack of the movie set during the filming of the rape scene. Doubly fetishized as woman and as child, she is a creature of seeming, as Bernard Duyfhuizen has persuasively argued. Bianca, Duyfhuizen claims, “represents the untellable, the feminine text that patriarchy tries to cover”; the body of the flesh-and-blood girl (or young woman) is “replaced only by traces formed by the sexual memories of men (the first male narratees of the text of her body” (par. 34–35). Duyfhuizen makes the convincing case, in fact, that there is much evidence in the text that Bianca is far older than the “11 or 12” that Slothrop takes her to be; it is a measure of the extent to which she is fetishized that her physical description is so radically skewed (Gravity’s Rainbow 463). Certainly her enforced status as consumer item is highlighted in the text, glowing in the garish light of hyperbole: “Not only is her song ‘On the Good Ship Lollipop,’ but she is also now commencing, without a trace of shame, to grunt her way through it, in perfect mimickry of young Shirley Temple—each straining baby-pig inflection, each curl-toss, unmotivated smile, and stumbling toe-tap . . . her delicate bare arms have begun to grow fatter, her frock shorter—is somebody fooling with the lights?” (466). The exaggerated quality of the little girl fetish is paralleled by the equally exaggerated response of the audience; her mother’s sadistic beating initiates a mass orgy, the participants portrayed in terms of mindless, lustful body parts—“unsheathed penis,” “juicy genitals,” “nose and tongue,” “bruised buttocks,” “bare breasts,” “stiff nipples,” “big toes,” “anal openings” (467).

The catalog of pornographic actions—a veritable cornucopia of consumerist erotica—brings to mind Terry Eagleton’s description of “the logic of the marketplace”: “The logic of the marketplace is one of pleasure and plurality, of the ephemeral and discontinuous, of some great decentred network of desire of which individuals seem the mere fleeting effects”
If the marketplace is a cornucopia of consumerist pleasure, however, powered by fetishism, and if the sadistic beating of Bianca reveals the ways in which the passengers of the *Anubis* function as consumer-effects of the ideological theme of dominance/submission, this instance of sadism is also generative; it sets into rippling motion a flexible economy of interconnected sexual events and relationships. The beating thus follows the hypothetically generative sadism of the text as a whole. John Hamill makes the case that the “productive” nature of the sadism in *Gravity’s Rainbow* can be explained by Baudrillard’s use of the word—not implying “material manufacture, but in relation to the Latin root ‘pro-ducere,’ to cause to appear or to render visible—in which case the imperative is to: Let everything be produced, be read, become visible, and marked with the sign of effectiveness; let everything be transcribed into force relations, into conceptual systems or into calculable energy; let everything be said, gathered, indexed and registered” (Hamill 61). Hamill notes that it is this form of production that explains for Baudrillard “how sex appears in pornography” (qtd. in Hamill 61). As Pirate Prentice’s ejaculate makes visible his military orders, so, too, does the orgy scene aboard the *Anubis* follow the directive to let everything be made “visible,” made “effective,” “be transcribed into force relations”—and all under the sign of sadistic pleasure. It is thus a “pornographic” scene in precisely the sense that Baudrillard suggests: bodies (or body parts) are compelled to be visible participants in the collective machine.

The fetishistic, sadistic desire Bianca triggers in Slothrop marks a major turning point in his development as a character, as Duyfhuizen has pointed out, and makes imagistically “visible” the extent to which his sexual desire is not only not his own but contains him. At the moment of orgasm Slothrop positively envisions himself “inside his own cock” and—like Humbert Humbert—trembling on the brink of full transcendent disclosure.4,5 The expected climax is simultaneously described as pre-ejaculation, near-revelation, pre-rocket launch: “He is enclosed. Everything is about to come, come incredibly, and he’s helpless here in this exploding emprise . . . red flesh echoing . . . an extraordinary sense of waiting to rise” (470). That his boundaries are delimited by the phallus, then, on one hand, endows him with associative power: “cruel, hard, thrusting” like the undiscovered rocket, he also will perhaps pierce “the virgin-blue robes of the sky” (465). On the other hand, however, the moment of breakthrough is unattainable: Slothrop is “helpless,” and it is the penis/rocket that assumes agency in undertaking the chivalric quest for itself. Orgasm discloses only “the king-ly voice of the Aggregate itself [, . . . a]nnouncing the void,” and Slothrop is left knowing that he believes “what They want him to believe,” that he cannot distinguish between the “real” and what he is compelled to “draw
for Them” (470). As Hamill has pointed out, sadomasochism carries with it an aura of “metaphysical desire” that is not only “not condemned” by the state but “becomes an integral part of institutional entrapment” (56). Sadistic sexual response is constructed in Gravity’s Rainbow so as to give the appearance of hidden revelation: by so doing it masks its own corporate genesis and compels productive action (one is compelled to “draw for them,” not merely to sit passively and receive).

Slothrop’s vision of his own containment within his penis is a significantly ominous conflation given that his sexual responses function in the productive service of the military-corporate institution. In a very real sense, he has never been a conqueror of women, a diviner of rockets, an establisher of patterns; the earlier Slothropian “hits” that are somehow connected to rocket strikes have little or nothing to do with women. The stars he places on his map in London speak rather to Slothrop’s own (probable) unknowing subjection to IG Farben, the transnational chemical corporation that (probably) conditioned him to respond sexually to the Imipolex later used in the German rockets. For Slothrop, then, the true sexual event is necessarily between the lethal technological phallus and the vulnerable, rapable masculine body. It is a further disempowerment of the masculine body that even his sexual response to the rocket is conditioned; it reflects no desire originating in a subject per se, but is rather a subject-effect constructed through corporate technology: “His erection hums from a certain distance, like an instrument installed, wired by Them into his body as a colonial outpost here in our raw and clamorous world, another office representing Their white Metropolis far away” (285). The engendering of the new corporate worker is thus accomplished through the absorption of the (boy) child—and “The Penis He Thought Was His Own”—into the corporate and transnational body of the mysterious “They” who manufacture the war as they manufacture gendered and sexual response: to ensure the productive energy that powers the constant, restless re-territorialization of capitalism (302).

Shadow-child Bianca presides over Slothrop’s glancing recognition of his own transcription into systems of control, as well as his complicity in the machinery of domination. The narrative acknowledges the moment, turning to second person, implicating character and reader in the sexual violence that generates (and is in turn generated by) the fetishized female body:

Of all her putative fathers—Max Schlepzig and masked extras on one side of the moving film, Franz Pokler and certainly other pairs of hands busy through trouser cloth, that Alpdrucken Night, on the other—Bianca is closest, this last possible moment below decks here behind the raving jackal, closest to you who came in blind-
ing color, slouched alone in your own seat, never threatened along any rookwise row or diagonal all night, you whose interdiction form her mother’s water-white love is absolute, you, alone, saying sure I know them, omitted, chuckling count me in, unable, thinking probably some hooker . . . She favors you, most of all. You’ll never get to see her. So somebody has to tell you. (472)

For a brief post-coital moment Slothrop perceives that “she exists” beyond his fetishized and programmed vision of her (“For Slothrop this is some discovery”) and determines that “she must be more than an image, a product, a promise to pay,” because “their whole economy’s based on that” (470, 472). Yet he leaves this moment of recognition, just as he leaves Bianca, and in refusing her promise that “we can get away,” Slothrop also betrays “the moment of kindness, so crucially redemptive in Pynchon’s fiction” (Duyfhuizen par. 7). He is for the rest of the novel haunted by visions of her death and dead body—although it is unclear whether or how she dies. He “will think” he sees her “washed overboard in a storm along with all [the] screaming Fascist cargo” of the Anubis (491). And in total darkness he will feel “Icy little thighs in wet silk swing against his face. . . . No matter which way he tries to move now . . . cold nipples . . . the deep cleft of her buttocks, perfume and shit and the smell of brine . . . and the smell of . . . of . . .” (531). The fetishized woman/girl thus finally disappears from the text, fades into a ghost who adds an audible note of horror to the dissolution of the masculine subject.

Ilse Pokler, the “[shadow-child] fathered on Erdmann,” functions similarly to highlight the simultaneous violence and vulnerability of the masculine subject (397). Every year Franz Pokler awaits the arrival at Zwolfkinder of a young woman who might or might not be his daughter, and every year replicates with her the (imagined) scene of her conception, when he “for a change” took a dominant role in sex, fantasizing his sadistic power—“poor helpless bitch you’re coming can’t stop yourself now I’ll whip you again whip till you bleed”—while he “pumped in the fatal charge of sperm” (397, 577). Ilse mirrors Bianca not only by virtue of their parallel conception, then, but because she also is quickly fetishized by those around her, a springboard to abusive fantasy (and abusive reality, to the extent that can be established). The two children thus fade into each other in a process of what Duyfhuizen terms “cross-mapping” (par. 23). Slothrop recognizes the “alignment,” and when he hears of “[Ilse’s] summer returns,” is “taken again by the nape and pushed against Bianca’s dead flesh” (Duyfhuizen par. 23; Pynchon 576).

Too late in both cases, the fetishized woman/girl reveals masculine complicity in the transnational military-corporate system, provides evidence, as
Hamill points out, that the “sadistic paedophilia” that continually and hyperbolically defines the masculine subject in *Gravity’s Rainbow* is “directly linked” to “entrapment within . . . institutional structures” (57). After Ilse disappears for the last time, Pokler comes to realize that she was (or might have been) “payment for the retrofit work he’d done on the 00000” (432). Worse, during the time when she was not with him, she was [or might have been] imprisoned in Dora, a part of the labor force that enabled the scientific production to which he is so addicted (his own function, significantly, his “special destiny,” being the design of the plastic fairing which will house Gottfried in the propulsion section of the 00000 [431]). In the years of Ilse’s “absence,” she has in fact (perhaps) been divided from his own workspace in the Mittelwerke by nothing more than a wall: “But it wasn’t till August [when he] found her at last waiting in the hotel lobby at Zwolfkinder with the same darkness in her eyes (how had he missed it till now? Such swimming orbits of pain) that he could finally put the two data together. For months, while her father across the wire or walls did his dutiful hackwork, she had been prisoner only a few meters away from him, beaten, perhaps violated” (428). Ilse’s final disappearance formalizes the extent to which she has never had “an existence in herself”: she “exists only as a pawn in the hands of Them, another performer in a wider form of political sadomasochism” in which Pokler himself has been an active player (7). Pokler’s recognition of what thus turns out to be the essentially corporate and in fact politically situated nature of his sexuality places him psychologically and actually on the other side of the wall dividing scientist and victim. Codes of dominance and submission lose their erotic valence in the face of the “naked corpses,” “the living, stacked ten to a straw mattress, the weakly crying, coughing, losers” (432).

The disappearance of the “shadow-child,” whether Bianca or Ilse, thus serves to precipitate and to foreshadow masculine crisis. Her absence as object demonstrates, in fact, the secondary status—and ultimately the vulnerability—of the subject position within the phallic code that relentlessly (if self-consciously) structures the world of the novel. Significantly, it is their mother (or shadow-mother) who stages most spectacularly the emasculating disappearance of the rapable and of the feminine. Margherita Erdmann’s apocalyptic revelation in “the castle” replays the gang rape scene from the filming of *Alpdrucken*—the scene of conception or shadow-conception of Bianca and Ilse—but substitutes the plastics of rocket technology for the penises and whips of the Grand Inquisitor and jackal men. She is taken to the old petrochemical plant by Blicero himself, the Blicero who has “grown on, into another animal . . . a werewolf . . . but with no humanity left in its eyes” (486). “Injected” into his inhuman, and yet still profoundly phallic, “mythical regions,” Greta confronts “the nobles
of the castle,” “important men” who “[seem] familiar” in their “power” and “gravity” (486, 487). Like the significantly named “Drohne,” however, the “power” of the new working aristocracy—seated in “the board room . . . round a conference table”—is derived from proximity to “the machinery” and is subject to the greater power symbolized in the “true ring of Polystyrene,” the “heavy chalice of methyl methacrylate” (487). By the same token, in the presence of the new plastics, the erections of Greta’s escorts “tr[y] to crawl out the openings in their clothes,” an odd description that dehumanizes the penis, associating it with the “plastic serpents” of the previous sentence which “[crawl] endlessly to left and right” (487). In a final figurative eclipsing of the essential humanity of the phallus, Drohne “strap[s] on a gigantic Imipolex penis over his own” (488).

The rape that appears thus to have been set up—“Drohne and the men stretched me out on an inflatable plastic mattress. . . . They took away my clothes and dressed me in an exotic costume of some black polymer, very tight at the waist, open at the crotch”—never actually happens. It is at this point, in fact, that Greta narrates her own abstracted disappearance from the scene. “There was an abyss between my feet,” she recounts; “Things, memories no way to distinguish them any more, went tumbling downward through my head. A torrent. I was evacuating all these, out into some void” (488). As in a classic representation of rape, her own subjectivity is emptied out; but this emptying out is not replaced with the image of her rapist. As she disappears into an abyss beyond violence, her absence is marked by a vortex. There will be no inscription of masculine identity here, not even a shadow child to remind a tortured man of his own working subjection to the larger System. In short, her raped and disappearing body doesn’t promise subjectivity; it shows man his relationship to rocket technology, one that finally nullifies him as subject, spreads that hypothetical subjectivity across the geographical space of the zone until no unified trace remains.

Slothrop’s disembodiment echoes Greta’s fantasy of dissemination, and her post-revelatory vision of the “[s]omething” that “had been deposited in a great fan that went on for miles. Some tarry kind of waste” (488). By the end of the novel Slothrop has been “scattered all over the Zone. It’s doubtful,” the narrative voice-over opines, “if he can ever be ‘found’ again” (712). It has been a temptation to argue that in this dissemination, Slothrop has eluded the System of dominance and submission that has compelled him. Molly Hite maintains, for example, that “one implication” of his “unsettling” identity loss “is that he has escaped control,” “for it is his phallocentric identity that has “placed” him in the apocalyptic pattern. . . . He [has become] radically uncentered, a fate that brings him to the opposite extreme of his initial characterization as a personified penis.”
Dana Medoro goes further, arguing that in his dissemination and detachment “from the solid and ‘steel erection’ of the Rocket, . . . Slothrop is not only a figure of regeneration but also one who is connected to Thoth” (197). Both of these readings argue for a liberatory potential personified in Slothrop’s scattered body, and thus both assume that there is within the text an “outside” of the System. This position, however, doesn’t square with the narrative tone, which seems much more in line with Chapman’s argument that there is no outside of the masculine code in *Gravity’s Rainbow*:

Slothrop’s paranoid quest for the Mystery Stimulus . . . is a way of acting out an anxiety about complicity in oppressive structures: in searching for information about who or what or how he somehow has been conditioned to respond sexually to the Rocket, he is in a sense asking about how he came to be coded sexually as he has been, how he himself has been written by the codes of dominance and submission. He finds no answers, just an infinite series of connections that do not add up to a coherent narrative. He cannot see the source of his coding as a male, because there is no outside point from which to see it: that coding is quite literally himself. (par. 14)

If indeed Slothrop’s disseminated condition is associated with the revelation that his sexual response is in service to the transnational corporation, then his (and the narrative) inability to formulate a post-apocalyptic sense of himself is evidence of the total inclusiveness of that containment.

In fact, Slothrop’s final dissolution is coded explicitly as itself a “corporate emblem.” The narrative describes him as “one plucked albatross. Plucked, hell—*stripped*. Scattered all over the Zone. . . . Only feathers” (712). The image is immediately followed by the well-known “The Man has a branch office in each of our brains,” a sentence not often quoted in its entirety, since it continues with “his corporate emblem is a white albatross, each local rep has a cover known as the Ego, and their mission in this world is Bad Shit” (712–13). That Slothrop has become a scattering of albatross feathers across the zone suggests not only his death—since it is the albatross’s symbolic function in literature to be, in fact, dead, testament to and punishment for human cruelty and the abuse of nature—but his total incorporation. What he has lost is only the “Ego,” the “cover.” This being the case, his resemblance is finally and altogether strikingly similar to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s description of the late-capitalist subject, for whom “an identity is essentially fortuitous”: “The subject,” they argue, “spreads itself out along the entire circumference of the circle, the center of which has been abandoned by the ego” (21). Like
Slothrop, the late-capitalist “schizo . . . continually wander[s] about, migrating here, there, and everywhere as best he can, [plunging] further and further into the realm of deterritorialization.” (35). In his wandering and dissemination, the good little worker of the late twentieth century inhabits “the very limit of capitalism: he is its inherent tendency brought to fulfillment” (35). Scattering of albatross feathers and corporate emblem, Slothrop embodies the very System he has, appropriately enough, sought to identify: his unboundedness personifies the permeable boundaries of the nation-state, the shifting constitution of transnational companies, the circulation of finance capitalism, the decentralization of multinational cartels. As Deborah Madsen suggests, in *Gravity’s Rainbow* the postmodern subject stands in relation to the schizophrenic corporation (146).

Far from achieving “that special place beyond systems of codes and information where our humanness resides” (Porush 117), then, Slothrop has entered the machine, in so doing reversing the cowboy dreams that cyberpunk would later attempt to resuscitate from out of a long dead ideological system. As he tells his ghost father, “M-maybe it exists. Maybe there is a Machine to take us away, take us completely, suck us out through the electrodes out of the skull ‘n’ into the Machine and live there forever with all the other souls it’s got stored there. It could decide who it would suck out, a-and when. Dope never gave you immortality. You hadda come back, everytime, into a dying hunk of smelly meat! But We can live forever, in a clean, honest, purified Electroworld” (699). In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, however, the “Machine to take us away,” the “purified Electroworld” so suggestive of the glittering cyberspace of Gibson or Stephenson, takes the form of a toilet, the narrative returning repeatedly to surreal visions of escape via the plumbing and sewage beneath. “[I]t’s good policy always to have the toilet valve cracked a bit,” the narrative advises, “to maintain some flow” so that when They come and shut off the water, “you’ll have that extra minute or two” to get rid of “dope, shit, documents” (694). As one’s illicit commodities are shunted down the toilet, so, too, is the individual subject plunged into the filth and impurity of hidden underground tunnels, as Slothrop’s fantastical hallucination of his descent down a Harvard toilet reveals:

[T]here comes this godawful surge from up the line, noise growing like a tidal wave, a jam-packed wavefront of shit, vomit, toilet paper and dingleberries in mind-boggling mosaic, rushing down on panicky Slothrop like an MTA subway train on its own hapless victim. Nowhere to run. Paralyzed, he stares back over his shoulder. A looming wall stringing long tendrils of shitpaper behind, the shockwave is on him—GAAHHH! he tries a feeble frog kick at the very
last moment but already the cylinder of waste has wiped him out, dark as cold beef gelatin along his upper backbone, the paper snapping up, wrapping across his lips, his nostrils, everything gone and shit-stinking now as he has to keep batting micro-turd out of his eyelashes, . . . the brown liquid tearing along, carrying him helpless . . . seems he's been tumbling ass over teakettle—though there's no way to tell in this murky shitstorm, no visual references. (66)

The escape route, then, is an evacuation, like the one Greta fantasizes, and it promises not a “clean, honest, purified Electroworld” but rather an immersion—and dissolution—in what Julia Kristeva terms the “abject,” that which is identified with the unclean and impure and which must be cast away from the self in the very process of constituting that self. “Neither subject nor object,” the abject is both “opposed to the I” in constituting it and at the same time the “dying hunk of smelly meat” that is the dangerous “in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” that “does not respect borders, positions, rules” (4). N. Katherine Hayles connects the horror of Kristeva’s abject to the dynamics of late capitalism, where imperialism becomes interconnected with “experialism”: “While imperialism is about expropriating valuable natural resources from less powerful nations, experialism is about forcing them to accept the industrial wastes that result when the expropriated natural resources are turned into capitalist commodities” (685). The process whereby the individual is constructed—through the continual casting away of the abject—is implicated in this recursivity of global capitalism, which also constitutes itself through the constant denial of those forces upon which production depends. When Gravity’s Rainbow asserts that the “colonies are the outhouses of the European soul” (448), it extends capitalism and imperialism beyond their productive self-representations. Pynchon’s “colonies”—like blackness, like shit—explicitly unite capitalism and the abject as the space in which productive masculinity is both fantastically constituted and terminally threatened. Corporate-military capitalism, similarly, is lived aboard a toiletship lost in time. And in a final, remarkable parallel, masculine sexual violence metamorphoses into masochism, and white male dominance resolves itself in corpophilia.