

## A Book and a Question

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This semester finds me teaching Thomas Pynchon once again, his first novel *V*. But this is only about that in passing. It begins with a question a student asked that does and does not pertain to the novel: It was about alienation and its standing in 20<sup>th</sup> century literature.

The modern feelings of alienation date back, are tied to industrialization and the accompanying urbanization. As Marx put it, modern industry led to the alienation of workers from their work, no longer having control over what they produced or even seeing the end product. According to Marshal Berman in his book on the feeling of modernity, Marx really captured the experience of modernity, and postmodernity we could add, with the phrase: "all that's solid melts into air," the title of Berman's book. So, historically speaking, to look to answer that question, we would have to go back over a century, and more to get to the starting point given that 20<sup>th</sup> century alienation as it appeared in literature and elsewhere is part of a historical process. But that is not the main point either.

A few years later, Freud appeared on the scene given his contribution to modern thought. In the 1950s, two books appeared that blended Marx and Freud, Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* and Norman O. Brown's *Life against Death*. Both these books would have a major influence on the next twenty years, and some would say be major instigators into what became the 1960s as they are most often thought of in the popular imagination: youth rebellion, free love and other such ideas. One can find at least the influence of Brown if not Marcuse in Pynchon work *Gravity's Rainbow*, if not in *V*. One more name needs to be mentioned before coming to the point of this essay: Norbert Wiener and his work on cybernetics. His thoughts on social entropy and communication entropy, as well as his work on machines had a large

influence on early Pynchon, whether he always agreed with Wiener or not (That is open to interpretation).

All these ideas, and more, are a part of the process of Western thought and the human experience of modernity and postmodernity—if there is truly a difference between the two. All of them are present to some degree, even if secondarily, in Pynchon's first novel. This novel, and others, are written at a point in time, and therefore could be considered static. However, the social, historic, and even to a degree scientific processes that lead to its creation do not stop with the novel, and therefore it can be read as a picture of those at a given time. Beyond that, the questions of technology and humanity presented almost sixty years ago are still ongoing, part of an ongoing process. A novel, then, can be read for the ideological thought processes that went into its creation, the trends it outlines from its time that are still occurring, such as alienation, as well as for literary merit.