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Review of Tore Rye Andersen, *Planetary Pynchon: History, Modernity, and the Anthropocene* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 228 pp.

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What do we do to reality, to people, to language, and to the planet itself in Pynchon's novels? We divide them up, we draw lines upon and between them, and so perhaps, if we were forced to pick only one, division would be the fundamental Pynchonian theme, the crucial concept in his critique of modernity. Physical boundaries between states (along with the imperial violence, wars, and natural destruction that attend them) are massive issues, as is science and technology's erasure of continuity in time and space, the "pornographies of flight" in the freeze-framing of film and calculus (GR 567). In Pynchon's histories, more and more of Earth's "Surface [has] succumb'd to Enclosure, Sub-Division, and the simple Exhaustion of Space" (MD 233), while fascism itself might have some deep connection to "the German mania for name-giving, dividing the creation finer and finer" (GR 391). Are forces of unification and bonding (under the microscope, or between persons) counterforces to such trends? Maybe; totalities and covalent bonds can be exploited by fascists too. Still, there is a hopefulness in the way the "weaving of ... molecules," the "living genetic chains," of banana breakfast smells can tell "Death ... to fuck off" (GR 10), and the invisible evidence of pinball machines (invisible outside a Pynchon novel at least) can point to "a single Mobility you never heard, a unity unaware of itself" (GR 596).

In this context it makes some sense that Pynchon critics, six decades into his storied career, would not only perform but self-reflexively consider their own acts of dividing, classifying, uniting, and revealing continuities. All this is especially true now that there are enough works to offer readers varied family resemblances, from a California trilogy of shorter, geographically similar novels to suggestions that, with *Vineland*, a Pynchon different from that of the 1960s and 70s – a writer perhaps more sentimental, less acidic, more apt to idealize family – emerged. Are there continuities of story-worlds to consider – of family lines and related characters, but also of style, thought, and word choice? What is gained and lost in inevitably focusing on one portion of an enduringly spectacular but unwieldy career over another?

In *Planetary Pynchon: History, Modernity, and the Anthropocene*, Tore Rye Andersen offers the latest and one of the best acts of corpus-division out there – best because it uses the continuity of Pynchon's mega-fictions to focus us on the most urgent of problems, an unfolding, multi-century era of planetary ruin, the titular Anthropocene, extending (per Andersen's persuasive timeline) from the eighteenth century forward – or from *Mason & Dixon*'s 1760s, through *Against the Day*'s 1890s to 1920s, and into *Gravity's Rainbow*'s World War II era and after. Andersen's book has much to say as well about those malignant lines drawn on the earth and Pynchon's drive, in spite of them, to uncover an originary unity, "a time before language, ... a state of total nature" (184), asking of characters and readers what *Against the Day* calls "a state of total attention"

(*ATD* 782). Andersen deals shrewdly as well with the ironic fact that Pynchon as author tends to see in his own tool of language “a technology that splits things apart” (183).

While making occasional references to other parts of Pynchon’s career, Andersen’s argument focuses on the three aforementioned novels, Pynchon’s longest, elements of what he calls his “Global Trilogy” for their international scope (less than obvious but nonetheless credible in the case of *Mason & Dixon*, Andersen shows) and for “the remarkable unity of their themes, their vision, and their level of ambition” (6). His central claim is that together these narratives “tell one coherent story about how European technological modernity has since the Enlightenment spread its web across the world, with significant consequences for individual human beings, for society, and for the planet and its interrelated biosphere” (192). In the six main chapters of this study Andersen interprets the Big Three twice, in effect, first (in a move that follows critic Samuel Thomas, among others) proceeding historically, from the eighteenth century of *Mason & Dixon* to *Against the Day* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*.

Chapter 5: “Pynchon’s Literary Evolution” then more succinctly interprets the novels in their order of publication, primarily to read both consistency and shifts in style, a welcome maneuver in Pynchon criticism, which can tend to leave the author’s rich language (its rhythms and its many registers of anger, lyricism, humor, and so on) by the wayside. In one of several moments of personalized reading, Andersen remarks here that, for its “lyrical intensity and precision that is mostly unmatched” in other works, “the prose of *Gravity’s Rainbow* affects me more than Pynchon’s other novels” (137). We even hear an intriguing bit about this Danish scholar’s work as a consulting editor on the first Danish translation of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Andersen himself writes with panache and in a vivid style, free of obscuring jargon, which is also quite welcome.

Planetary Pynchon’s three chapters on individual novels center on the urgently political issues that each text raises, from historiography and “westerling” movements in *Mason & Dixon* to the intertwining of capitalism and imperialism in *Against the Day* and the sinister depths of “immachination” in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, to name just some of the book’s sub-themes. Andersen draws throughout on Ernest Mandel’s three phases of capitalism (market capitalism, 1700–1850; monopoly capitalism, through 1939; and multinational capitalism after World War II) and seeks out natural affinities between these eras and those the trilogy depicts. As it traces these paths the book also evinces a wonderfully thorough knowledge of the extant Pynchon criticism, from monographs to all the good work done recently in edited collections of essays. At times Andersen offers extensive expositions of and arguments with significant ideas like Brian McHale’s notion of “genre-poaching” in *Against the Day* and Luc Herman and Steven Weisenburger’s Marcusean moves in “*Gravity’s Rainbow*,” *Domination, and Freedom*

(2013). In some of these stretches, though, I wonder whether Andersen's detailed critiques of others' claims and his addresses to long-running Pynchonian debates serve his overarching project, as in for example the discussion of whether Herman and Weisenburger underestimate the ambiguity in Slothrop's shocking sex scene with underage Bianca.

In fact, readers might, like me, spend some part of this book's middle expecting a swifter turn toward full examination of the key title term, one very much of our critical moment, the Anthropocene. But when that analysis does arrive in chapter 6, Andersen more than delivers. He begins this chapter, the best in the book, by refuting a broad characterization of contemporary fiction that will seem curious to those of us who know all the intricate work *Gravity's Rainbow* did with environmental themes fifty-plus years ago: Andersen critiques recent claims that novels critical of the Anthropocene have only been published since 2000. The connections within the trilogy that Andersen shows to be all about the Anthropocene's reign include many depictions of trees, giants, sentient rock, the deep time of pre-human landscapes, and Pynchon's abiding sense that the earth will and has long been fighting back against its many attackers, surveyors, and exploiters.

In its broad arc, this culminating chapter places Pynchon where he has always belonged: not just at the center of admittedly sometimes arcane discussions for us Pynheads, but in conversation with ecologically-minded turns in criticism and theorizing of U.S. and global literature – turns that Pynchon's fiction could often be said to have foretold. Such critical works include Wai-Chee Dimock's *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* (2006), though Andersen also makes interesting renewed use of one of the foundational works of what would become ecocriticism, Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Idea in America* (1964). Pynchon's historical fictions ostensibly reach back to the late eighteenth century, but of course the true Pynchonian history is an eons-long unrecorded one, as in one of Andersen's final close-readings, of Kit Traverse approaching Lake Baikal and seemingly "looking into the heart of the Earth itself, as it was before there were eyes of any kind to look at it" (ATD 768-9).

Like so many of the best Pynchon readers, to my mind, Andersen has an eye for not only these weighty themes but the associative and idiosyncratic, the Kute Korrespondences if you will. Andersen has published elsewhere on paratextual matters, and partway through the book comes this gem of an endnote about the "three layers of typeface on the cover" of *Against the Day*: does each "correspond[] to an installment in Pynchon's global trilogy"? "The back layer is written in a sans-serif font, like the original cover of *Gravity's Rainbow*. The next layer is a serif font,

corresponding to the cover of *Mason & Dixon*. And the upper layer is another sans-serif font, which corresponds to *Against the Day* and the period it depicts.” Andersen sees here a Pynchonian palimpsest that adds to an idea in his *Mason & Dixon* treatment “that layers function as force-multipliers” (205-6n55). In a similarly quirky vein, Andersen tracks many a semi-obscure, multi-novel thread, revealing Pynchon’s obsessions, from the fate of dogs and fish to the power of silent, wordless contemplation. He also dialogues illuminatingly with the rare Pynchon letter – including one in which he says his “heavy thots [sic] and capitalized references and shit” come only after “plot and character” are developed (139) – as well as with journalists’ mysterious anecdotes about Pynchon’s research in the late 1970s, when only one-third of the global trilogy had yet come to light and it seemed a fictional Godzilla might be on tap.

In other words, if it’s Pynchon material and available to public view, Andersen is on it – and uses it to tell a coherent, highly detailed critical story that gets at the heart of the writer’s multi-decade ambitions and his many oddball methods for showing us our planet anew. Reading this book I think of Pynchon’s comments to his agent, Candida Donadio, in 1964, that he had “four novels in process.” “If they come out on paper anything like they are inside my head,” a 27 year-old Pynchon wrote, “then it will be the literary event of the millennium” (Gussow 1998). Was he describing all or some of the global trilogy, then *in utero* and, in line with Andersen’s claims, all of a piece, just in need of forty-plus more years of evolution and polish? This “literary event of the millennium” took him into the next millennium if so, but as Andersen also suggests, the trilogy’s long period of creation, amid further environmental devastation, unfortunately vindicated Pynchon’s initial impulse in these anti-Anthropocene novels, his “wonder” of finding Earth to be “not a big, dumb rock” but a “living critter” in the early 1970s (GR 590). Back then it still might not have been (as Andersen’s conclusion’s title poignantly says, with a question mark at the end) “Too Late?” (192).

More answers to the question of Pynchon’s central 1970s-2000s aims may lie in his Huntington Library archive when it opens to scholars, who will be able to expand on and further document the many claims made in Andersen’s excellent study. For the global trilogy may have come to a publishing end in 2006, but we’ll be living on and making sense of Planet Pynchon for many years to come.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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