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ARTICLES

Mapping the World: Thomas Pynchon's Global Novels

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Taking Horace Engdahl's critique of the insularity of American literature as its starting point, the essay goes on to discuss Richard Gray's and Michael Rothberg's recent articles in *American Literary History*, both of which call for a literature capable of addressing the contemporary global reality. While both Gray and Rothberg claim that such a literature has yet to be written, the essay argues that Thomas Pynchon's three novels *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Mason & Dixon* and *Against the Day* can profitably be read together as an ambitiously conceived world-historical trilogy which tells the story of the gestation and emergence of our contemporary global reality.

"Shall I project a world?"

Thomas Pynchon: *The Crying of Lot 49*, 82

I

A few days before announcing the 2008 winner of the Nobel prize in Literature, the then Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy, Horace Engdahl, made a sweeping statement about the relation between modern European and American literature:

Of course there is powerful literature in all big cultures, but you can't get away from the fact that Europe still is the center of the literary world... not the United States. The US is too isolated, too insular. They don't translate enough and don't really participate in the big dialogue of literature. That ignorance is restraining.

This unreserved critique of the isolation and self-sufficiency of American literature reverberated throughout the world. As Permanent Secretary, Engdahl was the *de facto* chairman of the Nobel Prize committee which usually prides itself on its neutrality and its apolitical management of what is by many considered the world championship of literature. That the central figure in this annually recurring world-literary event should air his grievances before the prize announcement and exclude a political and literary superpower like the United States from the running was unprecedented, and Engdahl's polemical statement understandably caused considerable consternation in American literary circles.¹

The heated responses seemed to indicate, however, that Engdahl's broadside had hit a tender spot, and the bare statistics support at least parts of Engdahl's accusations. Only between three and five percent of the books published in the United States have been translated from another language,² and Engdahl's claim that American publishers "don't translate enough" would seem to be justified. In addition

¹ See e.g. Kirsch (2008) and David Remnick (the latter quoted in *Rising & Italie* (2008)).

² See for instance Wirtén (2007).

to fierce counter-attacks, desperate evasive manoeuvres and a set of excuses that varied in plausibility, Engdahl's critique did result in a number of concrete initiatives, such as the anthology *Best European Fiction 2010* which was published in December 2009 by Dalkey Archive Press.³ The book is edited by Aleksandar Hemon and has a preface by Zadie Smith, and even though Horace Engdahl is not specifically invoked in its paratexts, his statements nevertheless appear to have been an important motivating factor behind the anthology.

The publisher's choice of editor and preface writer sends a clear signal of their intentions: Bosnian-born Aleksandar Hemon and British Zadie Smith are called in as a guarantee that the anthology will actually counteract the isolationist tendencies criticized by Engdahl, and both Smith's and Hemon's introductory texts confirm this impression. In her preface Smith at once hearteningly and laconically states that: "For me this anthology [. . .] represents a personal enrichment. Books-wise, I was educated in a largely Anglo-American library, and it is sometimes dull to stare at the same four walls all day" (Smith, xiii). In his introduction, Hemon continues in the same vein:

Not so long ago, I read somewhere that only three to five percent of literary works published in the United States are translations. [. . .] The American reader seems to be largely disengaged from literatures in other languages, which many see as yet another symptom of culturally catastrophic American isolationism. (Hemon, xv)

The scarcity of translations is only part of the story of American literature's relation to the rest of the world, however. While foreign literature no doubt could and should take up more shelf space in American bookstores and homes, American authors are not necessarily guilty of the isolationist tendencies that characterize the US book market. In his broad-spectrum critique Horace Engdahl tars different actors in the American literary field with the same brush, but the question is whether an isolationist book market automatically results in isolationist fiction, and whether American

³ New editions of the anthology have since been published annually.

publishers' lack of interest in the rest of the world rubs off on American writers by default.

Some critics do consider contemporary American fiction to be marked by just such an introspective turn. In his interesting article "Open Doors, Closed Minds: American Prose Writing at a Time of Crisis," Richard Gray reflects on the claustrophobic tendencies of recent American literature, with particular emphasis on 9/11 novels that according to Gray are largely "stuck in the preliminary stages of trauma" and characterized by an evasive "retreat into domestic detail" (Gray, 130). Gray argues that "some kind of alteration of imaginary structures is required to register the contemporary crisis" (130), but he claims that American fiction writers have so far been unable to undertake the necessary transformation. Rather, the writers play it safe and are content with reproducing familiar structures which by now are woefully inadequate. According to Gray, the present historical reality is characterized by a weakening of the national idea and a consonant blurring of national boundaries. In the 21st century, Americans first and foremost live *between* cultures, between the traditional unity of the national state and the hybridity of the global market,⁴ and this unique historical situation creates certain possibilities and challenges for American writers:

Now more than ever, Americans find themselves caught between the conflicting interests and voices that constitute the national debate, situated at a peculiarly awkward meeting place between the culture(s) of the nation and the culture of the global marketplace – and perhaps above all, faced with the challenge of new forms of otherness that are at best virulently critical and at worst obscenely violent. What this offers to American writers, and particularly novelists, is the chance, maybe the obligation, to insert themselves into the space between conflicting interests and practices and then dramatize the contradictions that conflict engenders. [. . .] The degree to which writers do meet the challenge of allowing their work to be a site of struggle between

⁴ A similar idea informs Benjamin Barber's *Jihad vs. McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism Are Reshaping the World* (1996).

cultures – and a free play of idioms and genres – will surely help to determine where American writing is 10 or 20 years from now [. . .]. (Gray, 147)

In a comment on Richard Gray's article, Michael Rothberg supports his critique of the depoliticized American 9/11 novel, and he sides with the demand for a literature that to a larger extent can reflect and discuss the global reality. Rothberg's want list is even more elaborate than Gray's. While Gray especially emphasizes the need for literature to investigate the influence of globalization on American life, Rothberg calls for a literature that is equally interested in mapping the significant American influence on the rest of the world:

In addition to Gray's model of critical multiculturalism, we need a fiction of international relations and extraterritorial citizenship. If Gray's account tends toward the centripetal – an account of the world's movement toward America – I propose a complementary centrifugal mapping that charts the outward movement of American power. The most difficult thing for citizens of the US empire to grasp is not the internal difference of their motley multiculturalism, but the prosthetic reach of that empire into other worlds. (Rothberg, 153)

A literature, in other words, that is both capable of addressing the world in the United States and the United States in the world. What is called for here seems to be nothing less than an American world literature.

The concept of world literature can be construed in various ways. The originator of the concept, Goethe, considered world literature to be a concrete body of texts that by virtue of their cosmopolitan spirit were able to traverse the globe and challenge the dominance of national literatures. In the last few decades, the idea of world literature as a clearly delimited set of texts has to some extent been replaced by the notion of world literature as a reading strategy or a method which shares a number of features with the discipline comparative literature. In his influential essay "Conjectures on World Literature," Franco Moretti argues that "world literature is not

an object, it's a *problem*, and a problem that asks for a new critical method" (54–55), and he goes on to suggest the so-called 'distant reading' as one possible method which can detect transnational literary patterns that remain invisible to close readers. A similar idea appears in the work of David Damrosch, who in his magisterial *What Is World Literature?* (2003) says: "World literature is not a set canon of texts, but a mode of reading: a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time" (281).⁵

Whether one primarily considers world literature to be an object or a method, or perhaps a method which creates its own object, keywords like exchange, movement, border crossings, journeys, migration, multilingualism, translation and transnationality remain central to the understanding of the concept. Similar keywords also appear in Michael Rothberg's reply to Richard Gray, and while critics such as Moretti and Damrosch mainly think of such concepts as ways of connecting and comparing different works in the global literary field, Rothberg considers it to be a challenge to, and perhaps even a requirement for, each individual author in the age of globalization to address such important themes and integrate them in his or her own work. In other words, what is at stake in Rothberg's reply is not world literature as a transnational body of texts, and neither is it world literature as a reading strategy or a critical method. Rather, it is world literature as a sort of ethical imperative for contemporary American writers who as a result of the privileged position of the United States on the global stage may have had a tendency to forget that there is a world beyond the American East and West coasts.

⁵ For a dissenting view of world literature, see for instance Emily Apter's recent *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (2013) which argues that the singular notion of World Literature should be replaced by a plurality of world literatures. For a further critique of the concept, see the editorial "World Lite" in issue 17 of the journal *n+1*, where the editors accuse World Literature of having turned into a toothless academic institution centered on harmless books whose plots span continents but which in reality have very little of consequence to say about the mores of globalization. To counter the "spurious worldliness" of this institutionalized and commodified World Literature, the editors advocate a new internationalist literature with a desire to tell the truth and a clear project of standing in "*opposition* to prevailing tastes, ways of writing, and politics" (n.p.).

Michael Rothberg singles out a novel which in his opinion meets Richard Gray's demands for fiction about a deterritorialized America, namely Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008). O'Neill's novel paints a portrait of New York City as a multi-cultural melting pot, and while Rothberg praises its dynamic vision of a pluralist America, he rightly argues that the world outside the five boroughs remains somewhat absent in O'Neill's 9/11 novel, and he concludes his article by reiterating the need for American authors to "pivot away from the homeland and seek out a centrifugal literature of extraterritoriality":

What we need [...] are cognitive maps that imagine how US citizenship looks and feels beyond the boundaries of the nation-state, both for Americans and for others. Such an imagination will necessarily be double and will be forced to balance two countervailing demands: to provincialize the claims of "the first universal nation" and to mark its asymmetrical power to influence world events. (Rothberg, 158)

Gray's diagnosis of the introspective tendencies of much contemporary American literature is very convincing, as is Rothberg's analysis of the kind of literature needed to address the complex global reality. Less convincing, however, is Rothberg's concluding assertion that such an internationalist literature "has not yet been written" (158). In the remainder of this article I shall argue that such a literature has indeed been written, and at great length, by one of our leading novelists of globalization, Thomas Pynchon.

II

When attempting to categorize the in many ways uncategorizable novels of Thomas Pynchon, several different strategies present themselves. One obvious way of dividing Pynchon's works into distinct groups is to speak of an early Pynchon and a late Pynchon, divided by the 17-year hiatus between *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) and *Vineland* (1990). Such a distinction was prevalent in the 1990s, where critics saw both

Vineland and *Mason & Dixon* (1997) as a mellowing and maturing of Pynchon's talents,⁶ but the centrifugal pyrotechnics of *Against the Day* (2006) and the fast pace and sheer goofiness of *Inherent Vice* (2009) and *Bleeding Edge* (2013) seem to undermine the validity of these categories. In *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon*, Thomas Hill Schaub suggests a different way of drawing the map when he describes *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), *Vineland* and *Inherent Vice* as an informal trilogy of *California novels* which "return again and again to the same place and time: more or less from 1964 to 1971" (30). Even though *The Crying of Lot 49* is very different to *Vineland* and *Inherent Vice* (both of which share a number of themes, characteristics and characters), this category does have its merits, grouping together three novels which all revolve around a place and a time Pynchon experienced first-hand, as opposed to the historical settings of the Herbert Stencil-chapters of *V.* (1963) as well as of *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Mason & Dixon* and *Against the Day*. But if first-hand knowledge of the depicted time and place is a defining feature of Schaub's category, then we must surely also include *Bleeding Edge* and the Benny Profane-chapters of *V.* which are set in New York City where Pynchon lived in the late 1950s and again in the 1990s and 2000s. Not *California novels*, then, but perhaps novels-of-contemporary-America-as-experienced-at-some-point-or-another-by-Pynchon-himself. This notion, on the other hand, would seem to collapse when we discover that Pynchon himself labels *Bleeding Edge* "a historical romance" or that the 'contemporary' *Inherent Vice* deals with a period further removed in time than World War II was when the 'historical' novel *Gravity's Rainbow* was published.

Despite these problems of categorization, three of Pynchon's novels seem to me to stand clearly apart from the rest of his work: not as a result of the period in which they were published, or due to any specific setting in place or in time, but because of the remarkable unity of their vision. The three novels are *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Mason & Dixon* and *Against the Day* which I propose to call Pynchon's *world-historical* or *global* novels. In *Thomas Pynchon and the Dark Passages of History* David Cowart divides

⁶ See for instance many of the essays in *The Vineland Papers* (eds. Green et al.) and *Pynchon and Mason & Dixon* (eds. Horvath and Malin).

Pynchon's trajectory into three different phases: "Pynchon seems to have had a German period, a post-German period, and a neo-Continental or global period" (Coward, 59). While such a division allows Coward to pay close attention to the critique of German idealism in e.g. *Gravity's Rainbow*, I believe that it also runs the risk of obscuring the pronounced similarities between Pynchon's three longest novels. These works share so many conceptual, formal, stylistic and thematic traits that it makes sense to consider them as three installments in one major novelistic project, or perhaps as three parts of a triptych, but before I trace some of the many similarities between these three novels and elaborate on the single story they tell, I will begin with the latest chapter in what might aptly be termed Thomas Pynchon's global trilogy.⁷

III

The first indication of the global ambitions of Pynchon's vast *Against the Day* is located on the front inner flap of the dust-jacket, in the book description written by Pynchon himself:

Spanning the period between the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 and the years just after World War I, *Against the Day* moves from the labor troubles in Colorado to turn-of-the-last-century New York to London and Göttingen, Venice and Vienna, the Balkans, Central Asia, Siberia at the time of the mysterious Tunguska Event, Mexico during the Revolution, postwar Paris, silent-era Hollywood, and one or two places not strictly speaking on the map at all.⁸

⁷ *V.* is also very much concerned with world-historical and global matters, but it is equally concerned with contemporary America. Furthermore, the brief sketches of many different historical periods in *V.* differ significantly from the at once more elaborate and more focused approach to history that informs Pynchon's three largest novels. In its combination of historical and contemporary perspectives, *V.* forms a sort of blueprint for Pynchon's complete *oeuvre*, but the combination also makes the novel stand somewhat apart.

⁸ On the back cover of the paperback edition of the novel, released by Penguin in 2007, the long list of countries and cities is condensed to the equally loaded phrase "constantly moving between locations across the globe."

From the very first sentence of the book description, it is evident that the novel spans continents, and this global perspective continues through the rest of the description. In the next paragraph we hear of “a worldwide disaster looming just a few years ahead,” and in the final paragraph we learn that several obscure languages are spoken in the novel, before Pynchon concludes the description with this hopeful observation: “Maybe it’s not the world, but with a minor adjustment or two it’s what the world might be.”

The prospective reader of *Against the Day* is thus already met with a barrage of phrases underscoring the global scope of the novel before s/he begins reading the actual novel itself, and the important thing to bear in mind is that this focus was specifically chosen by Pynchon himself. Evidence shows that Pynchon is very involved in the exterior design of the first editions of his novels, from choosing the perfect cover images to writing his own book descriptions.⁹ Paratexts are no innocent matter, and Pynchon is fully aware of the way paratexts function as ‘thresholds of interpretation,’ steering the reception of a work into certain predetermined grooves.¹⁰ The pronounced focus on the world in *Against the Day*’s paratexts frames the novel in a particular way and creates a number of expectations that are only strengthened when we actually open the book and begin to read the first chapter. The first fifty pages take us to the World’s Fair in Chicago in 1893, which was held to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Columbus’s arrival in the New World. The scale of the Columbian Exposition far exceeded previous world’s fairs, and with its 200 imposing pavilions, its many newly constructed canals and its reproductions of for instance a street in Cairo, a German village, a Moorish palace and a Japanese tea house, the fair was an elaborate miniature of

⁹ Raquel Jaramillo, who designed the dust-jacket for *Mason & Dixon*, has stated that Pynchon was closely involved in the design process (Jingo 2006), and Tim Ware has reported that Pynchon himself searched the Web for the right cover image for *Inherent Vice* (Ware 2009). And at least since *Vineland*, Pynchon has composed his own book descriptions.

¹⁰ The phrase ‘thresholds of interpretation’ stems from the subtitle to Gérard Genette’s *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. For a further discussion of Pynchon’s deliberate use of paratexts, see Andersen (2013).

the world and therefore a fitting setting for a novel that is in itself a condensed representation of the world. The Chicago World's fair thus functions as a *mise en abyme* of *Against the Day* as a whole; a novel where the world is not just a neutral background for the actions of the characters, but an explicit presence – more of an actor than a landscape.

Even though the Columbian Exposition in 1893 and Pynchon's novel are both shaped by an ambition to represent a global space, they naturally express different worldviews. With its gleaming white buildings, the Chicago World's Fair was first and foremost conceived as a showcase for the brave new world of modernity. The exposition was in many ways an incarnation of the optimistic view of scientific progress that characterized the United States at the brink of a new century, and the many electrical wonders on show in the White City drew an idealized picture of an enlightened society where citizens could partake in the good life through the latest technological miracles.

Pynchon's portrait of the world around 1900 is far more disillusioned, even if the main characters in the first part of the novel, The Chums of Chance, are a bunch of well-scrubbed balloonists who in their sky blue trousers and red-and-white-striped blazers incarnate the patriotic optimism of the World's Fair. When we meet them on the first page of the novel, they are headed for the fair in their hydrogen sky-ship *Inconvenience*, and the conscientious boys eagerly look forward to seeing the White City and the "great Ferris Wheel, alabaster temples of commerce and industry, sparkling lagoons, and the thousand more such wonders, of both a scientific and an artistic nature, which awaited them there" (3). Their airborne approach to the meat city of Chicago soon puts their optimism to the test, however:

As they came in low over the Stockyards, the smell found them, the smell and the uproar of flesh learning its mortality – like the dark conjugate of some daylight fiction they had flown here, as appeared increasingly likely, to help promote. Somewhere down there was the White City promised in the Columbian Exposition brochures, somewhere among the tall

smokestacksunceasinglyvomitingblackgrease-smoke,theeffluviaofbutchery unremitting [. . .]. From this height it was as if the Chums, who, out on adventures past, had often witnessed the vast herds of cattle adrift in ever-changing cloudlike patterns across the Western plains, here saw that unshaped freedom being rationalized into movement only in straight lines and at right angles and a progressive reduction of choices, until the final turn through the final gate that led to the killing-floor. (10)

The striking passage establishes a number of contrasts between the sunny fictions of the White City and the murky realities of the slaughterhouse, between the unbounded freedom of nature and the rationalized meat industry of the city. The rosy view of futurity expressed in brochures from the fair is not left unchallenged in Pynchon's novel, which mercilessly exposes the dark side of modernity. The technological progress which from one perspective can be considered as a significant increase of civilization's possibilities and as an improvement of the conditions of life, can from another perspective be construed as a no less significant reduction of possibilities and as a sure path to the horrendous slaughterhouse of Western civilization, World War I. This more or less inexorable march towards the apocalyptic bloodbath of Flanders is a crucial theme in *Against the Day*, but naturally the intrepid balloon boys from the Chums of Chance have no idea of this future event when they land their skyship at the edge of the fair. They soon forget their unpleasant encounter with the stinking killing-floors of Chicago and embark on an adventurous exploration of the White City. However, the boys soon stray away from the brightly lit center of the exposition and wander into the shadowy periphery, which is not represented in the official brochures:

Observers of the Fair had remarked how, as one moved up and down its Midway, the more European, civilized, and . . . well, frankly, *white* exhibits located closer to the center of the "White City" seemed to be, whereas the farther from that alabaster Metropolis one ventured, the more evident grew the signs of cultural darkness and savagery. To the boys it seemed

that they were making their way through a separate, lampless world, out beyond some obscure threshold, with its own economic life, social habits and codes, aware of itself as having little if anything to do with the official Fair. [. . .] A Zulu theatrical company re-enacted the massacre of British troops at Isandhlwana. Pygmies sang Christian hymns in the Pygmy dialect, Jewish klezmer ensembles filled the night with unearthly clarinet solos, Brazilian Indians allowed themselves to be swallowed by giant anacondas, only to climb out again, undigested and apparently with no discomfort to the snake. Indian swamis levitated, Chinese boxers feinted, kicked, and threw one another to and fro. (22)

Such exotic items are not welcome in the white, civilized and well-regulated part of the Columbian Exposition, but are banished to the lawless margins, where the network of electricity has not yet taken root. The contrast between the white center and the ethnic periphery recalls Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, where the white necropolis Brussels (which reminds Marlow of a "whited sepulchre") is placed in opposition to the "wild vitality" of the African continent. *Against the Day* and Conrad's novella both take place in the same period of history towards the end of the 19th century, where colonialism was at its peak, and where ideas of exotic foreigners both frightened and titillated the bourgeoisie in European and American cities. The boys from the Chums of Chance do not really know how to relate to the ethnic panorama they have strayed into, and they breathe more easily when they find their way back to the safe geometric framework of the White City.

The innocent aeronauts of the Chums of Chance occupy a strange semi-fictional position in the world of the novel. On the one hand they appear as characters of flesh and blood who interact with the other characters, but on the other hand they are the main characters in the popular series of *Chums of Chance* books eagerly devoured by a number of other characters. Their ontological status is therefore highly uncertain, and as a confirmation that they are slightly out of joint with the rest of the story, they seem to age much slower than the more earthbound characters.

Even though *Against the Day* begins with the experiences of the ethereal Chums, the airborne lads can hardly be described as the main characters of the novel. They do reappear frequently throughout the story, but they disappear just as quickly and they are therefore just as difficult to pin down as the remaining cast of characters. One would be hard put to determine who the most important characters of Pynchon's novel are. *Against the Day* has hundreds of named characters, whose destinies weave in and out of each other across decades and continents. Fifteen or twenty of these characters do appear more frequently than the rest, but *Against the Day* is nevertheless most aptly described as a collective novel or a network narrative, where the true protagonist is the world around 1900.

The characters' different missions and agendas bring them to remote corners of the globe, where they constantly run into each other in the most unlikely places. When the young American Kit Traverse wanders around in the middle of the night in the Siberian wilderness as part of a personal quest, he accidentally stumbles into an old acquaintance from the American East Coast. The novel is full of such wildly improbable encounters, and Pynchon has clearly enjoyed toying with this convention from 19th century literature, where characters constantly ran into each other in order to exchange information and take care of business which in the fiction of the 20th and 21st century is transacted via telephone or e-mail.¹¹

No matter where in the world the many characters run into old friends or enemies, they see signs of the spread of modernity. Technology has always played a crucial part in Pynchon's novels and *Against the Day* is no exception. The novel devotes a great deal of space to describing the establishment of the modern networks of transportation and communication that are prerequisites for globalization as we know it. When Kit encounters Fleetwood Vibe in Tunguska, he has just come across the first traces of a new railroad that will eventually cleave its way through the vast taiga of Siberia and connect the Trans-Siberian Railroad with the barren Chinese Taklamakan desert (789). Elsewhere in the novel we learn that the American continent is similarly

¹¹ Pynchon accentuates these unlikely coincidences by deliberately overusing variations of the phrase "where who should he run into but..." (See e.g. 700, 829, 849, 890, and 911).

ensnared in a rapidly growing railroad web (177), and when Kit embarks on his Asian journey from a Belgian train station, he realizes that it is a matter of time before the whole world is spun into a network of steel:

At the Ostende-Ville Station, Kit had a moment [. . .] in which he glimpsed how Ostend really might not be simply another pleasure-resort for people with too much money, but the western anchor of a continental system that happened to include the Orient Express, the Trans-Siberian, the Berlin-to-Baghdad, and so on in steel proliferation across the World-Island. (567)

One of the novel's characters, the German professor Werfner, even argues that "the primary geography of the planet is the rails, obeying their own necessity, interconnections, places chosen and bypassed" (242). Werfner almost describes the rails not as an innocent instrument, but as a living organism with a will of its own, and a number of other characters would seem to agree. On a train station in Chicago, the detective Lew Basnight imagines that the railroad's "steel webwork was a living organism, growing by the hour" (177), and Chick Counterfly from the Chums of Chance reminds his colleagues of the glimpses of the Trans-Siberian Railroad they have had from their skyship: "From a high enough altitude, as we have often observed, indeed that great project appears almost like a living organism, one dares to say a conscious one, with needs and plans of its own" (259). *Against the Day* does not merely portray the railroad as a means of transporting troops and goods across borders, but employs it as a synecdoche for the inexorable progress of modernity and globalization.

The rapid growth of electricity also plays an important role in the novel. The Columbian Exposition is famous for introducing electricity to the American public, and during the first few decades after the fair, the blessings of electricity found their way into American everyday life. Parts of the story are set in the mining town Telluride in Colorado, the first American city to get electric street-lighting, and when the villains Deuce and Sloat first visit the small mountain city, they are struck by its renowned "glaring nightlessness" (261). When the novel ends more than twenty

years later, however, the street-lighting of Telluride has lost its novelty. During the course of the novel, electricity changes from being an exotic exhibit, an attraction in itself, into being taken for granted as a consumer good. Like the spread of the railroad, this process becomes particularly visible when viewed from above. After having ploughed the global skies for a couple of decades, the by now grizzled youngsters of the Chums of Chance return to their native United States towards the end of the novel, and as they fly westward across the continent, they notice a marked change:

While crossing the Continent the boys had expressed wonder at how much more infected with light the night-time terrains passing below them had become – more than anyone could ever remember, as isolated lanterns and skeins of gas-light had given way to electric street-lighting, as if advanced parties of the working-day were progressively invading and settling the unarmed hinterlands of night. But now at last, flying in over southern California and regarding the incandescence which flooded forth from suburban homes and city plazas, athletic fields, movie theatres, rail yards and depots, factory skylights, aerial beacons, streets and boulevards bearing lines of automobile headlights in constant crawl beyond any horizon, they felt themselves in uneasy witness to some final conquest, a triumph over night whose motive none could quite grasp. (1032)

In other words, electrified modernity has not only spread its tentacles across the continent; it has also colonized the night, the last stronghold against enlightenment. Value-laden terms such as “infected” and “invading” show a clear bias which runs through most of Pynchon’s novels. While Pynchon is no zealous Rousseau longing for an age when we were all noble savages, his novels do express a clear skepticism about the growth of technology and capitalism throughout the world.¹²

On a macro-level *Against the Day* encyclopedically describes the creation of the technological infrastructures that in the early 20th century occasioned the growing

¹² Pynchon’s ambivalent ideas about technology are perhaps most clearly expressed in his short essay “Is It O.K. to Be a Luddite?” (1984).

movement of goods and people across borders. The novel thus depicts how the rapid technological growth in the period contributed to globalization, or rather to the export of Western capitalism through various colonialist and imperialist impulses. At the same time, on the micro-level Pynchon shows the consequences of these global economic and political processes for individual human beings. The seamy side of Western capitalism is spotlighted in *Against the Day* through for instance the depiction of the Ludlow Massacre in 1914, where nineteen striking workers (including a number of immigrants) were killed by the National Guard of Colorado, or through the novel's many descriptions of the wretched conditions of production our consumer goods hail from. The double face of modern consumerism is underscored in a scene where Dally Rideout visits a department store in New York and abandons herself to the pleasures of shopping. The twelve stories of the department store soar impressively above the surrounding streets, but the imposing "gray modernity" of the building conceals a secret:

[T]he size of the place was not due to whims of grandiosity but rather dictated by a need for enough floor-area to keep rigorously set a veil separating two distinct worlds – the artfully illusory spaces intended for the store's customers and the less-merciful topography in between the walls and below the bargain basement, populated by the silent and sizable regiment of cash-girls, furnace-stokers, parcel-wrappers, shipping clerks, needlewomen, feather-workers, liveried messengers, sweepers and dusters and runners of errands of all sorts who passed invisibly everywhere, like industrious spirits, separated often only by inches, by careful breaths, from the theatrical bustle of the bright, sussurant floors. (346)

The department store is constructed to maintain an illusion of the total separation of capitalism's "theatrical bustle" and its "less-merciful topography," while Pynchon's novel is constructed to break this very illusion. In such passages, *Against the Day* insists on showing us both sides of modern consumer society; it insists on making the invisible modes of production visible and on reminding us that we are often

merely separated from the unpleasant downside of consumerism “by inches.” By constantly confronting us with the reverse side of the coin, Pynchon denies us the possibility of seeking shelter in convenient mechanisms of repression and he thereby moves us to reflect on our co-responsibility for the economic and political processes we are embedded in.

The exposure of individual co-responsibility in *Against the Day* is extended to include the global catastrophe that shook the world from 1914–18: World War I. The impending world war plays a significant role in the novel, not least in the characters’ conversations with each other. Everyone talks about the coming war, but no one really seems interested in averting it. The war is rather considered to be an inevitable event, an abyss at the end of a rapidly sloping historical terrain, and therefore the war does in the end become inevitable. By drifting passively along with the flow of history and considering the not yet materialized war to be a *fait accompli*, the characters submit to a false determinism and thus contribute to the reduction of a historical field of possibilities into a foregone conclusion. Through his meticulous mapping of this historical crossroads and its repressed possibilities, Pynchon shows that World War I was initially anything but inevitable, but at the same time he analyzes the psychological mechanisms and sins of omission which nevertheless contributed to its eventual manifestation.¹³

In light of the novel’s prolonged build-up to the Armageddon¹⁴ of World War I, it seems surprising how little space the novel actually devotes to the war itself. Even though *Against the Day* contains a number of fully fleshed characters, we experi-

¹³ A few characters do wonder at the general passivity in the years leading up to the war. Policarpe says: “It’s a peculiar game we all play. Against what looms in the twilight of the European future, it doesn’t make much sense, this pretending to carry on with the day, you know, just waiting. Everyone waiting” (543). Policarpe’s analysis is pertinent, but nevertheless he joins his friends in the waiting game.

¹⁴ Foreshadowing the apocalyptic war, the phrase “the end of the world” recurs numerous times in *Against the Day* (see e.g. 208, 327, 379, 480, 808). A similar foreshadowing takes place in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, where the word “holocaust” appears nine times in different contexts (but never pertaining to the actual Holocaust itself). Finally, the two world wars are prefigured in *Mason & Dixon*, where characters speculate on the likelihood of a future “Global War” (422) or “general European war” (718), and where the ominous phrase “the end of the world” likewise appears frequently (e.g. 27, 63, 80, 284, 718).

ence the war through the eyes of the less than real Chums of Chance. From their otherworldly perspective, they barely discover that war has broken out, and later they primarily experience it from the sheltering cocoon of neutral Switzerland: not as brutal battles in the mud of Flanders – “the mass grave of history” (554) – but as a shortage of goods and as passing freight trains filled with prisoners of war exchanged by the warring nations on neutral ground: “Out in Europe, the great Tragedy went rushing on [. . .]. But here in everyday Switzerland it was the other side of the tapestry” (1026). As David Cowart points out, the war is mostly fought “off-page” (Cowart, 186). The incomprehensible horrors of the war are only presented through their side effects, and this slanted depiction of the global disaster takes up only eight pages of the vast novel.

On the one hand the war is undoubtedly the central event of *Against the Day*; on the other hand it is largely absent from the novel whose expected climax turns out to be an anticlimax. This relative absence may seem odd, but it is part of a deliberate aesthetic strategy that is indirectly described in the novel, in a discussion of the “deliberate vacancies” (897) in Hunter Penhallow’s historical paintings, where the central subject is absent, but where the remaining elements of the paintings all point to the missing centerpiece and in concert define its outline. World War I is both absent from and omnipresent in *Against the Day*, as though the event is so painful that it can only be glanced at, presented through its non-presence. A similar strategy of non-representation appears in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, where some of the central horrors of World War II, the holocaust and the atomic bomb,¹⁵ and where V-E Day, the end of the war in Europe, is only mentioned as an afterthought (269). A further motivation for this refusal to focus on the sound and fury of the wars themselves is found in the story of the Japanese Ensign Morituri in *Gravity’s Rainbow*:

¹⁵ Or rather, they are everywhere in the novel, but in an indirect manner: Holocaust is refracted through descriptions of for instance the extermination of the dodoes and of the Hereroes in South-West Africa, just as the atomic bomb is mainly presented through a torn newspaper photo or through a song-and-dance-number which occurs at the precise moment that the bomb over Hiroshima detonated, and whose geometric pattern mimics that of a nuclear explosion.

Wars have a way of overriding the days just before them. In the looking back, there is such noise and gravity. But we are conditioned to forget. So that the war may have more importance, yes, but still... isn't the hidden machinery easier to see in the days leading up to the event? There are arrangements, things to be expedited... and often the edges are apt to lift, briefly, and we see things we were not meant to.... (474)

Against the Day shows that global crises like World War I are caused by a number of incalculable economic, political and technological processes that almost seem to be self-propelled once they are in motion. At the same time the novel argues that the global historical development begins at home, in the actions (and sins of omission) of individual human beings, and Pynchon's enormous historical panorama thus connects the personal, the local and the global level. The world outside is not safely removed in Pynchon's novel, but frighteningly begins in our own living room.

IV

However ambitious the huge *Against the Day* may be in itself, the novel is arguably part of an even larger project, a vast triptych of novels which would seem to fall well within the perimeters of the sort of world literature called for by Michael Rothberg.

In April 1964, Thomas Pynchon wrote to his agent Candida Donadio that he was facing a creative crisis with four novels in progress, which – if they came out on paper anything like they were inside his head – would be “the literary event of the millennium” and would have publishers dueling for the rights to publish them.¹⁶ Given Pynchon's intensely guarded privacy, we may never learn which particular four novels he was speaking of. It seems likely that one of them was *The Crying of Lot 49*. We also know from other letters from the period that one of them was *Gravity's Rainbow*.¹⁷ I will suggest that the last two novels may very well have been *Mason &*

¹⁶ Quoted in Gussow.

¹⁷ See for instance his letter to Kirkpatrick and Faith Sale from 29 June 1963, where his discussion about the dual nature of rockets clearly prefigures *Gravity's Rainbow*. The letter is held by the Harry Ransom

Dixon and *Against the Day*. At any rate, those two novels share so many conceptual, formal, stylistic and thematic features with *Gravity's Rainbow* that it makes sense to consider them parts of a coherent novelistic project conceived by Pynchon back in the early 1960s.¹⁸

Gravity's Rainbow, *Mason & Dixon* and *Against the Day* are structurally remarkably similar: Unlike Pynchon's shorter novels they are divided into three to five named parts, and each novel contains seventy-something chapters.¹⁹ Nothing dictates that Pynchon should have organized his three monstrous novels in so similar a manner, so this structural likeness alone seems to point to an underlying conceptual framework. The novels' many similarities extend far beyond the structural level, however. The books are woven together by a dense web of intertextual references. The skyship *Inconvenience* in *Against the Day* thus shares its name with the ship H.M.S. *Inconvenience* in *Mason & Dixon*, and the foretopman on the latter ship, Fender-Belly Bodine, is clearly the ancestor of the stoker O. I. C. Bodine from *Against the Day* and of the seaman Pig Bodine from *Gravity's Rainbow* (and *V*).²⁰ There are no Bodines in Pynchon's exclusively contemporary/American novels, so those related jolly jack tars – all sailors with the capability of traversing the globe – function as markers of mobility in Pynchon's global novels. Scores of such echoes connect the three novels, and part of the challenge of reading Pynchon's big novels is to bring these many latent connections to light.²¹

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¹⁸ It is naturally possible to question the assumption that Pynchon had already in 1964 decided on the settings and subjects for three novels which were published in 1973, 1997 and 2006, respectively, but few will deny that Pynchon's novels have long gestation periods. Pynchon thus already mentioned working on *Mason & Dixon* in 1970 (see Kachka).

¹⁹ *Gravity's Rainbow* has four parts and 73 chapters, *Mason & Dixon* has three parts and 78 chapters, and *Against the Day* has five parts and 70 chapters.

²⁰ Pynchon is of course aware that his faithful readers will track the connections between his novels, and the initials of O. I. C. Bodine anticipate, if read aloud, the joy of discovering yet another member of the Bodine family: Oh, I see Bodine!

²¹ It should be pointed out that the connections are not limited to Pynchon's global novels: *Against the Day* and *Vineland* are for instance connected by the Traverse family, just as *Vineland* shares a number of characters with *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Inherent Vice*. Pynchon's latest novel *Bleeding Edge* seems to be self-contained, however.

A number of other Pynchon scholars have already pointed out a set of similarities between Pynchon's large historical novels. David Cowart suggests that "one reads the Pynchon oeuvre as an ideational *roman fleuve*" (Cowart, 166), while Amy J. Elias argues that the common goal of Pynchon's three longest historical novels is to "imply a philosophy of history, or meditations on the nature of history itself" (Elias, 124), and Sascha Pöhlmann demonstrates that *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon* are united by their postnational imagination. Nevertheless, no attempts have yet been made to read the three big novels as parts of one novelistic project, and this may have something to do with the obvious stylistic differences between the three novels. The hyperflexible, slangy and ultramodern vernacular of *Gravity's Rainbow* differs radically from the beautiful 18th century English of *Mason & Dixon*, which has little in common with the more modern, but still slightly stilted and arcane voice of *Against the Day*. Stylistically, then, the three novels seem to point in very different directions, but on a more abstract level, this dissimilarity can be construed as a deeper similarity, since all three novels are written in a style that corresponds to their historical setting. In order to understand an earlier period, we have to try to understand how they thought, and in order to understand how they thought, we have to try to reconstruct how they spoke. In other words, the different stylistic registers of the three novels all seem to derive from the same underlying ambition to recreate the collective mindset of each period. This would certainly explain why the entirety of *Mason & Dixon* is composed as a pastiche of the language of the 18th century, complete with capitalized nouns and archaic spellings, and it would explain why the narrator of *Against the Day* finds it necessary to introduce quotation marks around the phrase "stunt" performers (1040) and to explain the meaning of the phrase to his media-savvy, movie-going 21st century readers.²²

A somewhat similar analysis of Pynchon's historiographic method is found in Brian McHale's essay "Genre as History: Pynchon's Genre-Poaching" which argues that Pynchon's complex use of genres likewise serves to reflect the historical settings

²² In a similar way, the decidedly familiar word "Sandwich" is consistently placed in quotation marks in *Mason & Dixon* in order to defamiliarize it and single it out as a newly emerged word in the timescape of the novel.

of his novels. Taking off from the welter of genres included and parodied in *Against the Day* – genres like westerns, detective novels, spy thrillers, boys' adventure fiction and science fiction²³ – McHale argues that the genres invoked are meticulously synchronized with the historical period and place they depict. The character Lew Basnight thus acts out three different detective genres in the course of the novel:

He begins his career as an operative for a detective agency battling strike breakers and anarchists, on the model of the Pinkerton detectives who figured as heroes in turn-of-the-century dime novels; after a detour into the London of Edwardian detectives of the Sherlock Holmes type, he finally finds himself on the West Coast, enacting the role of hard-boiled detective. [. . .] This insight has in its wake a broader appreciation of the logic of Pynchon's genre-poaching throughout *Against the Day*. Pynchon appropriates the conventions and materials of genres that flourished in the historical moments during which the events of his story occur. (McHale, 19)

McHale then extends this analysis to Pynchon's other novels (the superhero comics and musical comedies of *Gravity's Rainbow*, the gothic novels and captivity narratives of *Mason & Dixon*), and he goes on to argue that this genre-poaching serves as a form of *mediated historiography*: "To map an era's genre system is to map its popular *self-representation*. [. . .] The map of the era's genre system can also serve as a *cognitive mapping* of the era itself" (25). McHale's analysis is convincing, and together with the stylistic observations above it allows us to explain the apparent differences between Pynchon's novels as a result of a unified historiographic approach.²⁴

²³ For a fuller list of genres employed in *Against the Day*, see John Clute's review of the novel.

²⁴ When *Mason & Dixon* was published in 1997, many critics saw the psychological roundedness of the title characters as a clear sign that Pynchon had matured, but the same critics were baffled when confronted with the cardboard cut-outs of the Chums of Chance. In her review of *Against the Day* Michiko Kakutani wrote: "Whereas Mr. Pynchon's last novel, the stunning *Mason & Dixon*, demonstrated a new psychological depth, depicting its two heroes as full-fledged human beings, not merely as pawns in the author's philosophical chess game, the people in *Against the Day* are little more than stick figure cartoons." With McHale's arguments in mind, we can explain the roundedness of *Mason and Dixon* and the flatness of the Chums of Chance as a consequence of the genres they parody rather than as the result of Pynchon gaining and losing literary maturity.

Another crucial common feature of the three novels is that they take a world-historical crossroads as their starting point: The Enlightenment, World War I and World War II, respectively.²⁵ In a letter in support of Ian McEwan (who upon the publication of his novel *Atonement* was accused of plagiarizing parts of a nurse's diary from World War II), Pynchon has described himself as a writer of "historical fiction," and his preoccupation with historical matters and the writing of history – present from *V.* up to and including his self-labeled "historical romance" *Bleeding Edge* – reaches its fullest expression in his three global novels. In an encyclopedic fashion, all three novels map the complexity of the historical transition point in question, both the familiar and unfamiliar aspects, and not least the repressed possibilities in the different periods. *Mason & Dixon* is thus a veritable catalogue of the multiplicity of the 18th century. During their travels through Europe, Africa and America, the title characters are exposed to a number of strange happenings that may initially seem to be products of Pynchon's rampant imagination, but which on closer inspection turn out to be based on historical fact. This is for instance the case with a gigantic rolling cheese which on a rampage through an idyllic British landscape almost kills Mason (and which has its factual basis in an annual cheese-rolling festival in Gloucestershire), or with an amorous robot duck which is a (slightly upgraded) version of French inventor Jacques de Vaucanson's famous mechanical duck from 1739. The more unlikely an event or an object in *Mason & Dixon* initially appears, the more likely it is to have a historical counterpart.

Mason & Dixon salvages such robot ducks and other forgotten wonders from the dusty curiosity shop of the 18th century and thereby reconstructs the motley pluralism of the period. Rather than merely reproducing the prevalent notion of Enlightenment as a wizened gathering of disputing scientists, Pynchon seeks to rescue some of the fantastic elements that have since been marginalized by our usual

²⁵ This is one of the reasons why the otherwise globally minded *V.* does not belong in the category of Pynchon's world-historical novels. One half of the novel takes place in contemporary New York (and would thus seem to belong to Pynchon's novels of contemporary America), and the other half of the novel – the historical chapters – spans from the late 19th century and until World War II and therefore includes more than one major historical rupture.

conception of the period, some of the possibilities that have since been repressed by a rationalistic discourse of knowledge, from the dustbin of history. With their mission of scientific demarcation, the astronomer Mason and the surveyor Dixon are unwitting agents of this process of rationalization “that slowly triangulates its Way into the Continent, changing all from subjunctive to declarative, reducing Possibilities to Simplicities that serve the ends of Governments” (345). The relentless reduction of these many possibilities, the narrowing of a historical field of many possibilities into a single beaten track, is at the absolute center of *Mason & Dixon*. As opposed to many other depictions of the period, which consider the advent of scientific rationality to be inevitable, Pynchon describes the Age of Reason as the crossroads it really was and leads us down a number of roads not taken.

A similar method appears in *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Against the Day*, and all three novels thus employ a double historiographic perspective. On the one hand, through the experiences of his many characters Pynchon lays bare the heterogeneous complexity of the historical nodal points. He does not render the past *as* past but as the present that it once was, and thereby he reopens the very real possibility that everything could have turned out differently. Pynchon's historiographical interest in the unmaterialized possibilities of the past is shared by the so-called counterfactual history, which is practiced by e.g. Niall Ferguson in his book *Virtual History*.²⁶

On the other hand, Pynchon employs the retrospective perspective of traditional historiography by showing what actually happened; how possibilities were “reduc'd to certainty” (*Mason & Dixon*, 177) and how the confusing space traversed by his characters eventually transformed into a well-defined timeline. By operating with this double perspective – immersion and retrospection – Pynchon deviates from traditional perspectives on linear history to emphasize that the individual human being actually has a significant degree of freedom in each historical moment. As Leni Pökler reflects during a street protest in *Gravity's Rainbow*: “There is the moment,

²⁶ Not anything goes in virtual history. In his introduction to the book, Ferguson stresses that “[w]e should consider as plausible and probable *only those alternatives which we can show on the basis of contemporary evidence that contemporaries actually considered*” (86). In its well-researched account of rolling cheeses, robot ducks and hollow earths, *Mason & Dixon* seems to operate on the same principle.

and its possibilities" (159).²⁷ In *Mason & Dixon* the title characters frequently discuss whether the border they are carving between Pennsylvania and Maryland is evil and whether they ought to abandon their mission (see e.g. 249, 478, 573), but in spite of their many misgivings about the consequences of their work, they end up completing the job. In *Gravity's Rainbow* the German rocket engineer Franz Pöckler experiences similar pangs of conscience as he contributes to the development of V2 rockets during World War II, but he also chooses the easy, dutiful path. And in *Against the Day* the majority of the characters are happy to submit to what they perceive as inevitable historical processes, and by thus relinquishing their personal responsibility they help usher in a world war that was anything but inevitable.²⁸ The characters in Pynchon's world-historical novels mostly conform passively to a more or less imaginary historical determinism, but had they been even slightly less defeatist – had they seen history from within, as a field of possibilities, rather than from without, as a timeline mapped out in advance, and had they seized the not insignificant freedom offered them by the moment – they might have contributed to changing the course of history, if ever so slightly.²⁹

The three historical periods treated in Pynchon's global novels (Enlightenment, Modernity and Postmodernity), interestingly correspond closely to the German thinker Ernest Mandel's division of capitalism into three major phases: 1) Market capitalism or freely competitive capitalism which dominated from 1700 to 1850 and

²⁷ Leni's phrase is echoed in *Mason & Dixon*, where the narrator speaks of "the Road, and its Chances" (700).

²⁸ In her book on the causes of World War I, *The War That Ended Peace: How Europe Abandoned Peace For the First World War*, Margaret MacMillan reaches a similar conclusion, arguing that if those who were against the war had stood up more firmly, things might have evolved much differently. As she succinctly puts it: "There are always choices."

²⁹ There are examples of such acts of resistance in Pynchon's novels. In *Gravity's Rainbow* a Counterforce briefly arises, but its uncoordinated actions turn out to be woefully ineffective. In *Mason & Dixon* Jeremiah Dixon seizes the whip from a brutal slave-driver and turns it on him (an event which is once again based on historical fact), but this slight act of resistance does nothing to free the many slaves encountered by Mason and Dixon on their journeys. Of course Pynchon does not naively expect such minor personal acts to change the course of history, but his awareness of their relative ineffectiveness does not equal any defeatism on behalf of his characters. If no one acts, nothing will happen, the novels would seem to argue, and in *Mason & Dixon* Pynchon anachronistically finds hope in the laws of chaos theory, according to which even small acts can have major consequences (see e.g. 286, 364, 429).

saw the rise of industrial capital in domestic markets as well as early forms of global trade. 2) Monopoly capitalism or the stage of imperialism which lasted until the outbreak of World War II and was characterized by the exploitation of colonial territories and of the aggressive development of international markets. 3) Late or multinational capitalism, which grew out of World War II and is characterized by a decolonizing of the colonies and the emergence of a new economic world system.³⁰ According to Mandel, these three stages of capitalism correspond in turn to three major stages of technology: The mechanical technology of the original industrial revolution, the electric technology which emerged around 1890, and the electronic technology which grew out of World War II. The complex relation between humans and technology has always been a crucial theme for Pynchon, and his three global novels therefore pay close attention to those technological stages, from the looms, clocks and mechanical ducks of *Mason & Dixon*, over the cars, telephones and electric street-lights of *Against the Day*, and to the development of electronic weapons-technology and early computers in *Gravity's Rainbow*. This is not to say, of course, that Pynchon based his world-historical project on Ernest Mandel's theories (Mandel's dissertation *Der Spätkapitalismus* was submitted at the Free University of Berlin in 1972, and the English translation, *Late Capitalism*, did not appear until 1975), but it is nevertheless fruitful to compare Pynchon's and Mandel's related ideas on the three phases of capitalism. By keeping the notable similarities between those two writers in mind, we may better grasp the coherence and scope of Pynchon's historical vision.³¹

The historical phases described by Pynchon and Mandel are primarily phases of Western history, but Pynchon's treatment of them is in no way limited to the Western world. The historical development in Europe and the United States naturally has significant consequences for the rest of the world, and Pynchon's mapping of these historical nexuses cover a global space. The action in his three novels spans all continents and provides detailed accounts of the movement of people and goods across

³⁰ Mandel makes this distinction in *Late Capitalism*. Fredric Jameson draws heavily on Mandel's ideas in his theories of postmodernism and late capitalism (see e.g. Jameson 1991, 35).

³¹ Mandel, incidentally, was a survivor of the German concentration camp Dora which plays an important role in Pökler's story in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

borders. One of Pynchon's preferred stylistic devices has always been the catalogue, and his world-historical novels are therefore full of lists and enumerations which in a sensuous prose draw a tactile portrait of the products and people of a global reality. A typical example is the following description of Mason and Dixon's first encounter with America, more particularly their arrival at the harbor of Philadelphia in 1763:

[A]ll 'round them Sailors and Dockmen labor, nets lift and sway as if by themselves, bulging with casks of nails and jellied eels, British biscuit and buttons for your waistcoat, Tonicks, Colognes, golden Provolones. Upon the docks a mighty Bustling proceeds, as Waggon-drivers mingle with higher-born couples in Italian chaises, Negroes with hand-barrows, Irish servants with cargo of all sorts upon their backs, running Dogs, rooting Hogs, and underfoot lies all the debris of global Traffick, shreds of spices and teas and coffee-berries, docks fallen and squash'd, seeds that have sprouted between the cobblestones, Pills Balsamic and Universal, ground and scatter'd, down where the Flies convene, and the Spadger hops. (259)

On the one hand, the description of the docks constitutes a very concrete and delimited slice of life, but on the other hand the whole world seems to be present in the little tableau. Pynchon's catalogue leads our attention to the global in the local, and his condensed sketch of the bustle of the harbor is a microcosm that points directly into our own globalized age.³² The description of the transnational movement of goods and services is of course further elaborated in *Against the Day's* account of the gradual spread of capitalism across the globe, and it culminates in *Gravity's Rainbow's* portrait of multinational companies like Shell and I.G. Farben which during

³² *Mason & Dixon* is often described as a novel about America, but the emerging global space is invoked so many times in the course of the novel (less than two thirds of which take place in America) that it would be very reductive to focus exclusively on the novel's treatment of American history. To underscore the international scope of the novel, the word "global" appears numerous times in *Mason & Dixon* (together with similar words like "earthwide" and "world"). Much of *Mason & Dixon* is set in America, but themes like "Global Trade" (105, 159) and "global-Communications" (721) are central to the novel.

the 20th century became just as powerful actors on the global stage as traditional nation states. Nevertheless, Pynchon's story of the origins of multinational companies and global trade begins in the 18th century, where the East India Company is a powerful presence, and where Mason at one point says to Dixon: "Charter'd Companies may indeed be the form the World has now increasingly begun to take" (252).³³

While the bustling portrait of Philadelphia seems mostly positive, the story of movements across national borders is by no means unequivocally happy. Migration also has a dark side, and transnational movements can have sadder causes than a lively global trade. One of the most elaborate catalogues in *Gravity's Rainbow* extends across three pages and describes how World War II for a while turned whole ethnic groups rootless and threw them to all points of the compass. The main character, the American lieutenant Tyrone Slothrop, wanders through a devastated Germany after the end of the war, and everywhere he encounters the starved participants in the greatest migration of world history:

The Nationalities are on the move. It is a great frontierless streaming out here. Volksdeutsch from across the Oder, moved out by the Poles and headed for the camp at Rostock, Poles fleeing the Lublin regime, others going back home, the eyes of both parties, when they do meet, hooded behind cheekbones, eyes much older than what's forced them into moving, Estonians, Letts, and Lithuanians trekking north again, all their wintry wool in dark bundles, shoes in tatters, songs too hard to sing, talk pointless, Sudetens and East Prussians shuttling between Berlin and DP camps in Mecklenburg, Czechs and Slovaks, Croats and Serbs, Tosks and Ghegs, Macedonians, Magyars, Vlachs, Circassians, Spaniards, Bulgars stirred and streaming over the surface of the Imperial cauldron [. . .]. (549)

³³ Mason's statement recalls similar passages in *Gravity's Rainbow*, where the IG Farben representative Wimpe tells Tchitcherine that "our little chemical cartel is the model for the very structure of nations" (349), and where Tchitcherine subsequently has a vision of an all-encompassing transnational entity: "Oh, a State begins to take form in the stateless German night, a State that spans oceans and surface politics, sovereign as the International or the Church of Rome, and the Rocket is its soul. IG Raketen" (566).

This is also globalization, in case we had forgotten, as is the matter of slavery as a precondition for the rapid spread of imperialism across the globe, the extermination of the Herero tribe in German South-West Africa in 1904, or the forceful introduction of the New Turkish Alphabet in Kyrgyzstan – all of which are dramatized in the course of Pynchon's world-historical trilogy. In their editorial "World Lite," the editors of *n+1* criticize the many novels of current world literature which shift "arbitrarily from region to region with spurious worldliness." While their critique may be justified with regard to a number of contemporary writers, the worldliness of Pynchon's novels cannot be dismissed so easily. The global settings of his novels are dictated by the historical processes he describes rather than by any random globetrotting impulse in his jet-setting characters. In other words, *Mason & Dixon* does not span three continents because Pynchon thought it would be cosmopolitan and sophisticated, but because the historical Mason and Dixon were impelled by real historical forces and characters to visit these three continents, and because the story of slavery at the heart of the novel involves both Europe, Africa and America.

Taken together, Pynchon's three novels depict the gradual emergence of a global reality where our lives are inextricably entwined with the lives of people on the other side of the globe, whether we are aware of it or not. As a consequence of their global reach, the three novels include characters from many different nations and continents as well as snippets of several languages, such as Japanese, various African dialects, Latin, Middle Dutch, Finnish, Hungarian, German, Spanish, Russian, Italian, French, Swedish, Danish – and even some English and American. As the book description for *Against the Day* self-consciously states: "Obscure languages are spoken, not always idiomatically."³⁴

³⁴ In *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* Emily Apter calls for a policy of *non-translation* which leaves "passages and phrases free-standing in a naked state of untranslation" (61). While her plea for a "love for linguistic foreignness" and a "respect for the integrity of individual languages" (62) is primarily aimed at the discipline of comparative literature, her description of the policy of non-translation would also seem to be an apt description of Pynchon's evident joy in other languages. However, it would be wrong to consider Pynchon's inclusion of various languages to be a mere case of "love for linguistic foreignness." The three novels also focus on language as an instru-

Pynchon's global vision extends even further than to the mapping of Western modernity's gradual colonization of the earth. His large novels all exhibit a marked concern for the global environmental consequences of the actions of mankind. Pynchon's ecological awareness is in many ways a product of the American counter-culture of the 1960s and early 1970s, where the British scientist James Lovelock was an important figure. Inspired by the discipline of cybernetics, Lovelock introduced his influential Gaia Hypothesis around 1970, where he described Earth as a self-regulating organism whose feedback processes maintain a fragile balance between its various living elements. As Tom LeClair has shown in *The Art of Excess*, there are many similarities between James Lovelock's Gaia Hypothesis and *Gravity's Rainbow*, where Earth is repeatedly described as a living creature. The character Lyle Bland finds it "hard to get over the wonder of finding that Earth is a living critter, after all these years of thinking about a big dumb rock to find a body and psyche" (590), and the idea recurs in both *Mason & Dixon* where our planet is described as "a living Creature" (602), and in *Against the Day* which describes Earth as being "alive, with a planet-shaped consciousness" (939).³⁵

In his writings on Gaia James Lovelock warns that the rapid growth of mankind in the 20th century risks damaging Earth's fragile biological equilibrium to such an extent that the global organism can no longer repair itself, and the same concern surfaces in Pynchon's global novels which all create scenarios of ecological disaster. In a striking passage in *Gravity's Rainbow* the narrator points out that the global resources will eventually be used up as a result of industrialized capitalism's demand for constant growth:

ment of colonization (e.g. in *Gravity's Rainbow's* description of the introduction of the New Turkish Alphabet in Central Asia) and political control – "bringing the State to live in the muscles of your tongue" (*Gravity's Rainbow*, 384). Pynchon's treatment of the political aspects of language is thoroughly analyzed in Maltby (1991).

³⁵ Pynchon labels those who believe in such a form of mineral consciousness "Sentient Rocksters" – a phrase which appears in both *Gravity's Rainbow* (612) and *Against the Day* (133).

Taking and not giving back, demanding that “productivity” and “earnings” keep on increasing with time, the System removing from the rest of the World these vast quantities of energy to keep its own tiny desperate fraction showing a profit: and not only most of humanity – most of the World, animal, vegetable and mineral, is laid waste in the process. The System may or may not understand that it’s only buying time. And that time is an artificial resource to begin with, of no value to anyone or anything but the System, which sooner or later must crash to its death, when its addiction to energy has become more than the rest of the World can supply, dragging with it innocent souls all along the chain of life. Living inside the System is like riding across the country in a bus driven by a maniac bent on suicide... (412)

The ecological doomsday vision reappears in *Against the Day*. Among the huge cast of characters are the Trespassers – time travelers who claim to have returned from the future, “a time of worldwide famine, exhausted fuel supplies, terminal poverty” (415), where the capitalist experiment has come to an end: “Once we came to understand the simple thermodynamic truth that Earth’s resources were limited, in fact soon to run out, the whole capitalist illusion fell to pieces” (415). With no places left on Earth to colonize in the search for new resources, the Trespassers have journeyed back to the past, where resources were still plentiful. The novels thus launch a clear critique of Western consumerism and its dream of constant growth, and they plea for a more sustainable model where we become more aware that “*everything is connected*” (GR, 703), and that our actions here and now can have consequences on the other side of Earth. Such an almost epiphanic vision of the connectedness of everything comes to *Against the Day*’s Kit Traverse, as he wanders about in the fertile Siberian taiga immediately after the Tunguska Event in 1908:

Two small black birds who had not been there now emerged out of the light as it faded to everyday green and blue again. Kit understood for a moment that forms of life were a connected set – critters he was destined never to see existing so that those he did see would be just where they were when he

saw them. Somewhere on the other side of the world, an exotic beetle stood at a precise distance and compass bearing from an unclassified shrub so that here, in this clearing, these two black birds might appear to Kit, precisely as they were. (782)

In Pynchon's complex picture of the world we are all connected in multiple ways, both through the flow of capital across national borders and through complex technological and biological systems within which we are all embedded but nonetheless cannot grasp in their entirety. Judith Butler's challenge to contemporary American writers in the wake of 9/11 to "emerge from the narrative perspective of US unilateralism [. . .] to consider the ways in which our lives are profoundly implicated in the lives of others" (7), and Michael Rothberg's similar plea for "a fiction of international relations and extraterritorial citizenship" (153) and for "cognitive maps that imagine how US citizenship looks and feels beyond the boundaries of the nation-state, both for Americans and for others" (158) are thus taken up by Pynchon's ambitious novelistic project. As opposed to other recent major American novels such as *Infinite Jest*, *The Corrections*, *American Pastoral* and *Underworld*, Pynchon's world-historical trilogy describes the USA as a corner of the globe rather than as the undisputed center of the world.³⁶ Of course the nation plays an important part in Pynchon's three novels, as it has done in world history, but at the same time Pynchon shows a clear awareness that the global dominance of the United States may be a passing historical phenomenon. His global novels are not so much written from an American perspective as from a cosmopolitan perspective, where the American exceptionalism of Roth and DeLillo is replaced by the will and ability to see the nation from the outside. This ability comes to the fore in a small scene in *Gravity's Rainbow*, where the American Slothrop hides from American military police in the French city Nice.

³⁶ Wallace's encyclopedic *Infinite Jest* mainly takes place in a small area of Boston, and *Underworld* opens with the telling line "He speaks in your voice, American" – a clear indication of the theme and intended audience of DeLillo's novel. Franzen does send some of his characters in *The Corrections* outside of America's borders, but the parodic and stereotypical Europe they visit has very little to do with any real Europe. The title of Roth's novel speaks for itself.

The MPs knock on the door to Slothrop's hotel room and demand that he let them in: "For possibly the first time he is hearing America as it must sound to a non-American. Later he will recall that what surprised him most was the fanaticism, the reliance not just on flat force but on the *rightness* of what they planned to do" (256).

Each time Thomas Pynchon breaks his silence and publishes another big novel, literary critics habitually trot out the by now rather overworked designation Great American Novel, or describe the novel as yet another chapter in Pynchon's ongoing history of America, but Pynchon's large novels aim wider than that.³⁷ The New World is merely one among many geographical settings in this American writer's world-spanning narratives, and Thomas Pynchon is in many ways a novelist of globalization. Of course, the word 'globalization' is merely a convenient shorthand for a welter of different overlapping processes that defy any attempt to summarize them. Like the postmodern hyperspace described by Fredric Jameson in his groundbreaking work on postmodernism, the historical development that we call globalization "has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world" (Jameson, 44).

Jameson famously concludes his 1984 essay by calling for a new "aesthetic of cognitive mapping" whose figurative mappings of the global system will endow the individual subject with a clearer understanding of his position in the world:

[T]he new political art (if it is possible at all) will have to hold to the truth of postmodernism, that is to say, to its fundamental object – the world space of multinational capital – at the same time at which it achieves a breakthrough to some as yet unimaginable new mode of representing this last, in which we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion. (54)

³⁷ See e.g. Brian Morton's review of *Mason & Dixon* for *Scotland on Sunday*: "If anyone is still looking for the Great American Novel... then this may well be it" (quoted on the Vintage paperback edition from 1998).

There can be no doubt that the fundamental object of Pynchon's global novels is "the world space of multinational capital," and while the three complex novels are just as interested in reproducing "our spatial as well as our social confusion" as in lighting a path through the wilderness, this balancing of two perspectives – confusing immersion and clarifying retrospection – is not an obstacle to, but a prerequisite for any adequate attempt at global cognitive mapping. A figurative reenactment of our current spatial and social confusion does not necessarily preclude our "capacity to act and struggle," as Jameson would have it, but rather exposes the shaky foundations from which we all have to act. Pynchon's global novels may not be examples of the "as yet unimaginable new mode of representing" the world space envisioned (somewhat utopically) by Jameson, but they do attempt to draw a map of the world and our uncertain position in it.

The present article is certainly not the first one to identify Pynchon's global scope. In his seminal essay "Gravity's Encyclopedia," Edward Mendelson wrote of Pynchon's international scope and singled out *Gravity's Rainbow* as the encyclopedic narrative of the global age. The term employed in 1975 by Mendelson was "the new internationalism," but Mendelson's description of a "new international culture, created by the technologies of instant communication and the economy of world markets" leaves little doubt that he was speaking of what we have later come to label globalization. Sascha Pöhlmann elaborates on Mendelson's remark in his own *Pynchon's Postnational Imagination*, stating that:

Gravity's Rainbow and *Mason & Dixon* (and, one might add, all his other novels to a larger or smaller degree) share a truly postnational imagination that goes beyond the international, and [...] they situate themselves more firmly within a world culture than within any national framework." (Pöhlmann, 11–12)

Pöhlmann argues that Pynchon's postnational imagination denies "nation-ness its hegemonic status" (13), and while I obviously agree that Pynchon's work transcends the national framework, I would also contend that his globally minded novels never lose sight of the very real consequences that nation-states have had in the historical

periods they describe. Nations are very much a part of global history, and rather than merely denying their hegemonic status Pynchon maps the bloody trail they have left behind.

This mapping is not limited to his three longest novels. As both Amy J. Elias and David Cowart point out, *V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Vineland* (and to a lesser extent *Inherent Vice* and *Bleeding Edge*) also touch upon aspects of global history, and discussions of Pynchon's historiography should by no means ignore those shorter works. I would argue, however, that his most coherent and sustained treatment of the *longue durée* from which we all derive can be found in *Mason & Dixon*, *Against the Day* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, especially if we read them as a series, or as a Great Global Novel that maps the progress of the world through three important historical transition points of the past 250 years. Cowart has likened Pynchon's historical method to Foucault's genealogy (Cowart, 160). This comparison to Foucault's spatial historiography aptly describes the meticulous mappings undertaken by Pynchon in each of the three novels, but if we consider the works as parts of a sequence, the foucauldian maps of three different historical nodal points together constitute a linear narrative that has just as much in common with Hayden White's more narrative approach to history (outlined in e.g. *The Content of the Form*). Combined, the three novels tell a bleak story of humanity's headlong plunge into modernity,³⁸ of the progressive immachination³⁹ of mankind (beginning with the looms in *Mason & Dixon* and culminating in the marriage between Gottfried and the Rocket in *Gravity's Rainbow*) and the resulting loss of humanity (the psychological fullness of Mason and Dixon giving way to the flatness of the Chums of Chance and the complete dispersal of Slothrop), and of the shrinking of alternative visions to shield us against the day (embodied in Pynchon's tale of the Hollow Earth, which is first visited by Jeremiah Dixon and whose entrance has shrunken considerably when it is visited by the Chums of Chance). The appearance of The Hollow Earth in both *Mason &*

³⁸ In his introduction to *Pynchon's Against the Day: A Corrupted Pilgrim's Guide*, Christopher Leise characterizes *Against the Day* as a story "centered around the inexorable progression into modernity" (2), which is also a fitting description of Pynchon's global trilogy as a whole.

³⁹ The word "immachination" appears twice in *Gravity's Rainbow* (297, 318).

Dixon and *Against the Day* is only one of countless close connections between the three novels, which once again points to the likelihood that they are conceived as separate installments in a unified project; or which at the very least underscores the considerable benefits – and perhaps even the necessity – of reading the 221 chapters and twelve parts of Pynchon's three global novels as different stages in one single story of the gestation and emergence of our contemporary global reality. "Maybe it's not the world, but with a minor adjustment or two it's what the world might be."

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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