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Abstract:

Readings of Thomas Pynchon's novels are central to Brian McHale's theorization of the difference between modernist and postmodernist writing. McHale's argument that the difference resides in a shift from an 'epistemological dominant' to an 'ontological dominant' is, conversely, the foundation of his understanding of Pynchon. However, his reading of *Against the Day*, which suggests that the novel's use of multiple 'genre mirrors' aims to represent historical 'truth', sits uneasily within this literary-historical narrative. This essay argues that since for McHale postmodernism's ontological plurality ultimately refers back to discursive plurality, there is in fact no contradiction here. It further argues that Pynchon's project of pluralizing what McHale calls 'novelistic ontology' is no longer synonymous with 'de-conditioning' modernist readers: Pynchon's readers have either long since surrendered modernist modes of reading, or are postmodern natives who never practised them in the first place.

Reading McHale reading Pynchon, or, Is Pynchon still a postmodernist?

Simon de Bourcier

Brian McHale writes in the essay that he contributes to the 2012 *Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon*: 'so ubiquitous is Pynchon in the discourses of postmodernism that we might go so far as to say, not that postmodern theory depends on Pynchon's fiction for exemplification, but that, without Pynchon's fiction, there might never have been such a pressing need to develop a theory of literary postmodernism in the first place'.¹ Reviewing the *Companion*, Ali Chetwynd identifies this as its 'unifying argument', and incisively argues that the volume as a whole - which McHale co-edits - 'constitutes an extended claim that Pynchon's career can stand for the precedence of postmodernism' in the post-War period, and presents a picture of the "'state of the art" in Pynchon studies' which is 'hard to untie from models of postmodernism that emerged during the process of his initial critical canonisation'.² McHale's speculation that without Pynchon there would be no imperative to explain postmodernist writing with a theoretical model may verge on hyperbole, but it is certainly the case that Pynchon is central to McHale's own theorization of postmodernist fiction, and, conversely, that McHale's well-known literary-historical narrative of a 'shift of dominant' from the epistemological to the ontological between modernism and postmodernism is the main structuring principle of his readings of Pynchon.

McHale sets out these mutually-supporting arguments in 'Change of Dominant from Modernist to Postmodernist Writing', a paper given in Utrecht in 1984 and published two years later, and the essay 'Modernist Reading, Postmodernist Text: The Case of *Gravity's Rainbow*', published in 1979. The thesis set out in 'Change of Dominant' becomes the basis of the extended argument of McHale's 1987 *Postmodernist Fiction*, and a re-worked version of the article forms the first chapter of that book.³ The understanding of Pynchon proposed in 'Modernist Reading' surfaces scatteredly throughout *Postmodernist Fiction*, and the essay is also re-printed, with an appendix,

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in McHale's 1992 book *Constructing Postmodernism*.⁴ In the 1970s and 80s theories of postmodernism such as McHale's presented themselves very much as – to borrow a phrase from the subtitle of Steven Connor's 1989 book *Postmodernist Culture* – 'Theories of the Contemporary'; but what was contemporary in the 70s and 80s is now past history.

The identification of Pynchon with postmodernism is increasingly problematic when we turn our attention to his twenty-first-century output. Sascha Pöhlmann begins and ends his introduction to the 2010 critical collection *Against the Grain* with the admonition, 'We may have to stop calling Thomas Pynchon a postmodern writer'.⁵ The bases of this contention are twofold: first, that Pynchon's 'postnational imagination', as displayed in *Against the Day*, 'exceeds the conceptual framework of postmodernism';⁶ second, that *Against the Day* 'positions itself far from the postmodern excesses of too easily conflating the real, the imaginary and the fictional'.⁷ If we insist that the Pynchon of *Against the Day*, *Inherent Vice* and *Bleeding Edge* is still a postmodernist, are we relegating him to the position of a sort of literary Keith Richards – still churning out riffs that were exciting and dangerous in the 70s, but are now just nostalgia? More importantly, are we wilfully ignoring new themes and formal innovations in Pynchon's later work in order to bolster an identification with postmodernism that is convenient for our critical and pedagogical narratives? At any rate, we will lack, as Chetwynd puts it, 'a sense of how Pynchon's relevance might endure once the identification between the contemporary and the canonically postmodern finally becomes untenable'.⁸

In this essay I use McHale's Pynchon criticism as a case study, as a way of thinking about the role that the concept of postmodernism plays in Pynchon criticism, and the closely related question of the part that Pynchon plays in theories of postmodernism. I focus in particular on McHale's reading of *Against the Day* in the essay 'Genre as History: Pynchon's Genre-Poaching', which sits a little uneasily in the theoretical space carved out by *Postmodernist Fiction*. A great deal of critical discourse about Pynchon still takes place in or around that space: Kathryn Hume's reading of *Against the Day* in *Aggressive Fictions* is explicitly grounded in McHale's account of postmodernist fiction's ontological concerns,⁹ and Lawrence Russell Harvey implicitly endorses McHale's theory even though he disputes McHale's identification of *The Crying of Lot 49* as a modernist rather than postmodernist text.¹⁰

'[W]e are all, still, modernist readers'

Let us look in more detail, then, at how McHale constructs his theorization of postmodernism on and through readings of Pynchon's early novels. 'Modernist Reading, Post-Modern Text' argues that 'the variety of postmodernist writing exemplified by *Gravity's Rainbow* - the variety of which Pynchon is perhaps the preeminent practitioner - is specifically directed against a particular norm of modernist reading'.¹¹ McHale's conception of literary postmodernism clearly fits David Foster Wallace's pithy definition of postmodernism as 'what comes after modernism'.¹² There is also a conception of postmodernity as a historical phase of culture - famously the basis of a controversy between Jürgen Habermas and Jean-François Lyotard¹³ - far broader in scope than postmodernism's reaction against what Fredric Jameson called in the 1980s 'the hundred-year-old modern movement',¹⁴ involving a break with modernity conceived on a much grander timescale. There are certainly arguments to be made about Pynchon's participation in this backlash against Enlightenment humanism and scientific rationalism - witness Victor Strandenberg's indignant reaction to *Mason & Dixon's* 'antirationalist' critique of the Enlightenment, which Strandenberg predicts will 'have no more lasting effect than the paltry assaults of Foucault and the critical theorists'¹⁵ - but they are beyond the scope of this essay, which principally addresses the viability or otherwise of applying McHale's theorization of the difference between modernism and postmodernism to Pynchon's twenty-first-century output.

McHale identifies two effects of the type of postmodernist writing which Pynchon 'exemplifie[s]', or rather, two ways of describing its effect. One is that of 'disrupting the conditioned responses of the modernist reader (and we are all, still, modernist readers), of de-conditioning the reader'. (Take note, please, of that claim made in 1979 that 'we are all, still, modernist readers', because I shall return to it toward the conclusion of this essay.) The other way in which McHale describes this refusal of modernist reading is to say that its 'ultimate effect is radically to destabilize novelistic ontology'.¹⁶ In *Postmodernist Fiction* this point about 'ontology' becomes integrated into a broader argument about the difference between modernism and postmodernism, namely that there is a 'shift of dominant from problems of *knowing* to problems of *modes of being* - from an epistemological dominant to an *ontological* one'.¹⁷ In other words, modernist fiction foregrounds the question of how we know the world, often by employing multiple subjective viewpoints which the modernist reader reconciles into a single stable ontology. This is an orthodox interpretation

of modernist writing, recalling, for example, Eric Auerbach's reading of *To the Lighthouse*: Woolf's 'multipersonal method', Auerbach argues, has 'synthesis as its aim'.¹⁸ Pynchon's early novels, says McHale, preserve this 'epistemological dominant'. However, postmodernist fiction presents us with a plurality of incommensurable worlds which the reader cannot reduce to a stable ontology. By the time we get to *Gravity's Rainbow* Pynchon has moved 'from a modernist poetics of epistemology to a postmodernist poetics of ontology, from Oedipa's anguished cry, "Shall I project a world?", to the unconstrained projection of worlds in the plural'.¹⁹ McHale's reading of *Vineland* in *Constructing Postmodernism* also focuses on 'ontological plurality': it is the role of television in that novel, he argues, to 'complicate, diversify, and destabilize the ontological structure of the fictional world'. It 'functions at two levels, at one and the same time contributing to ontological plurality and modelling that plurality *en abyme*'.²⁰

Worlds

But what does it mean to talk of 'ontological plurality', of different 'worlds' or 'modes of being' in this way? In his 2007 essay 'What was Postmodernism?, or, The Last of the Angels', McHale argues that angels in postmodern culture 'signify the existence, or at least the possibility, of alternative subcultures, life-styles, values-systems, enclaves of meaning, psychological realities - of alternative "worlds" in the extended sense'.²¹ In *Postmodernist Fiction* McHale is working with a similar definition of 'world' when he says that postmodernism 'arrives at its own version of the fantastic [...] by literalizing a characteristic modernist metaphor, i.e. "world" used in the sense of "way of life, life-experience, or *Weltanschauung*". This sense of the word *world* is a 'metaphorical extension of the literal ontological sense of "world" to embrace an epistemological, psychological, or sociological meaning'.²² Similarly, McHale's interpretation of Bakhtin (McHale uses the less common transliteration 'Baxtin') emphasizes that in Bakhtin's understanding of novelistic mimesis 'what the novel mimes [...] is social discourses, the vehicles of human social experience'. McHale is then able to argue that 'postmodernist fiction literalizes or realizes what in Baxtin is only a metaphor: the metaphor of "worlds" of discourse'.²³ In other words, postmodernist writing presents us with a plurality of literal worlds which resist assimilation into a single world, but these can be understood as grounded in, and perhaps in the last analysis as *representing*, an 'epistemological, psychological, or sociological' plurality, a plurality of 'alternative subcultures, life-styles, values-systems, enclaves of meaning, psychological realities'. This is arguably a rather a tame sort of pluralism, and John A. McClure takes

McHale to task for that very reason in his book *Partial Faiths*. McClure argues that McHale's model, in assuming that only the 'imaginary space of literature' is 'capable of hosting' a plurality of worlds, leaves 'largely unexplained [...] the possibility that at least some postmodernists might be seriously engaged in challenging secular constructions of reality and entertaining the idea of a profoundly pluralistic universe'.²⁴ In other words, for McHale, angels represent the possibility of 'alternative subcultures' and 'psychological realities'; McClure wants us to consider the possibility that Pynchon wants us to consider the possibility that there might really be angels – or at least worms that play pinochle on your snout. I am inclined to concur that McHale's model does scant justice to the radical relativization of reality that we find in Pynchon, or William Burroughs, or Philip K. Dick, or Jonathan Lethem, but this kind of attempt to tame postmodernism's ontological effects is very common. Eric L. Berlatsky, for example, following Richard Walsh, argues that the inconsistent – and therefore implicitly plural – world of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* stands in a purely rhetorical relationship to the real world. The novel speaks of possibilities that may yet come about, and thereby promotes social change, but those possibilities remain 'only fiction'.²⁵

Mason & Dixon

McHale focuses on this essentially social version of pluralism in his essay 'Mason & Dixon in the Zone, or, A Brief Poetics of Pynchon-Space': 'the American West of *Mason & Dixon* is poised at a moment when Native American and European social worlds coexist uneasily, when neither regime prevails and pluralism is de facto the order of the day'.²⁶ Theories of the postmodern are central to McHale's reading of *Mason & Dixon*. Specifically, he draws on the work of Fredric Jameson and Linda Hutcheon. From Jameson he takes the idea of postmodernism's spatial dominant, to which he argues *Mason & Dixon* conforms, as opposed to the temporal dominant of modernism. From Hutcheon, of course, he takes the concept of 'historiographic metafiction'.²⁷ Hutcheon's notion of historiographic metafiction, like McHale's concept of the ontological dominant, is one of the most ubiquitously deployed critical concepts in scholarly writing on postmodernist fiction, although it has provoked some dissent. Berlatsky, for example, argues that while much postmodernist fiction does indeed foreground the textuality of history in line with Hutcheon's model, postmodernist writers also exhibit faith in the ability of non-narrative or anti-narrative representations to grant access to the historical real.²⁸ Nevertheless, McHale is one of many critics who place *Mason & Dixon* in the box labelled 'historiographic metafiction'. The danger that attends the

readiness with which they do so is one which haunts McHale's ongoing triangulation of Pynchon and postmodernism more generally, namely the danger of lapsing into tautology or circularity. (What kind of writer is Pynchon? He's a postmodernist. What's a postmodernist? Well, you know, like Pynchon...)²⁹

On the other hand, if we eschew these concepts altogether we are likely to end up with something like James Wood's negative assessment of *Mason & Dixon*, a particularly egregious example of what Pierre Macherey calls the 'normative fallacy', in which the critic measures a text against an imagined ideal, viewing it as 'the provisional version of an unfulfilled intention'.³⁰ Wood longs for Pynchon's 'fattened incidents to shrink into life'; he complains that Pynchon does not know 'when to stop accumulating', rather than asking what excessive narrative accumulation might signify about contemporary culture and its eighteenth-century roots. Wood measures Pynchon's methods of characterization against those of Charles Dickens and Henry James, rather than listening to what *Mason & Dixon* tells us about the inappropriateness or impossibility of those methods in a late-twentieth-century historical novel. Rather than seeking to understand Pynchon's postmodernism on its own terms, Wood holds up *Mason & Dixon* against his chosen yardsticks – the Victorian realism of Dickens, the proto-modernism of James – and in so far as it falls short of these models concludes that it is 'not a novel'.³¹ Wood accuses Pynchon of not being Dickens or James, of not having written the novel he *ought* to have written, and thinks he has scored a fatal hit; McHale understands that *The Crying of Lot 49*, for example, is not 'a proper Jamesian novel' because the Jamesian 'central consciousness' is 'not the point at all'.³² He attempts to provide alternative conceptual tools which describe what Pynchon actually does.

Against the Day

How well, though, do the concepts of postmodern theory – which describe *Mason & Dixon* so well – serve when we turn to Pynchon's twenty-first-century novels? Is there a danger that concepts such as the 'ontological dominant' and 'historiographic metafiction' might become enshrined as – in Macherey's phrase – the 'unfulfilled intention' against which Pynchon's more recent work is measured? This might explain the readiness with which *The Times's* reviewer consigned *Inherent Vice* to the category of 'minor Pynchon'.³³ In order to trace the limits of the usefulness of postmodernism as a conceptual framework for reading twenty-first century Pynchon, I shall look closely at McHale's reading of *Against the Day* in the essay 'Genre

as History: Pynchon's Genre-Poaching', an early version of which appeared in *Critique* in 2009, and which is included in a revised form in *Pynchon's Against the Day: A Corrupted Pilgrim's Guide*, edited by Jeffrey Severs and Christopher Leise. How does McHale's account of *Against the Day* relate to his evolving theorization of Pynchon's postmodernism? McHale claims that in *Against the Day* Pynchon makes the following 'wager': 'Multiply the genre mirrors, set them at different angles to each other, and one might stand some chance of approximating the historical "truth" of the era that produced them'.³⁴ This seems to place *Against the Day* closer to the epistemologically-oriented, multiply-perspectival writing that McHale finds in *V.*, with its 'stylized imitations of characteristic modernist strategies', than to the 'unconstrained projection of worlds in the plural' that he attributes to *Gravity's Rainbow*.³⁵ Reconciling this reading of *Against the Day* with McHale's over-arching theory of the shift of dominant is going to require us to pay close attention to some of the nuances of both reading and theory, and may suggest some qualifications of the theory.

For a start, the fact that Pynchon turns his attention in *Against the Day* to a period which he had previously written about in *V.* highlights the way that McHale's characterization of the trajectory of Pynchon's career implicitly depends on the chronology of Pynchon's subject matter in *V.*, *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Vineland* as much as on the chronology of their publication. It is easy to make the case that *Vineland*, for example, is a fully-fledged postmodernist text (or to find a consonance, as Hanjo Berressem does, between *Vineland* and Jean Baudrillard's analysis of postmodern culture³⁶) because the novel is set in California in the 1980s and its cultural vocabulary is indisputably postmodern. On the other hand, because the cultural and generic reference points of Stencil's narrative belong to the early twentieth century, McHale is on safe ground representing *V.* as a modernist text. In 'Genre as History' McHale acknowledges that Pynchon's 'genre-poaching' in *Against the Day* is 'synchronized with the unfolding chronology of his storyworld', that is, that action set at a particular time in history is presented in narrative modes borrowed from fiction belonging to that time. McHale further recognizes that this logic permeates Pynchon's fiction from *Gravity's Rainbow* onwards, but he shies away from making the same claim regarding *V.*, despite his insistence (in the earlier criticism I have been discussing) on the modernist texture of that novel's narrative.³⁷ If this synchronization plays a greater part in explaining the differences between, say, *V.* and *Vineland* than McHale's literary-historical narrative (which wants to explain the difference in terms of modernist vs postmodernist writing) admits, then it might also account for the apparent recrudescence of a modernist mode

of reading – with, in Auerbach’s phrase, ‘synthesis as its aim’ – in his critical commentary on *Against the Day*.

Now, according to McHale, in *Vineland*, and in postmodernism more generally, television functions as ‘the figure of ontological plurality itself’; it is ‘postmodernism’s preferred model of its own plurality’.³⁸ In *Gravity’s Rainbow* narrative and representation are primarily mediated not through television but through film, but McHale is happy to elide the difference between the two visual media: ‘if the culture as a whole seems to hover between reality and televised fictions, what could be more appropriate than for the texts of that culture to hover between literal reality and a cinematic or television metaphor?’³⁹ However, the principal ‘genre mirrors’ McHale identifies in *Against the Day* belong not to television or cinema but to print culture: boy-inventor adventure stories, dime-novel westerns, espionage ‘shockers’.⁴⁰ (He qualifies this by saying that the distortions in Pynchon’s ‘genre mirrors’ are symptomatic of twenty-first-century perceptions of the popular genres he pastiches. In particular, the western episodes are indebted to revisionist westerns like *The Wild Bunch* and *Unforgiven*, HBO’s *Deadwood* and Cormack McCarthy’s *Border Trilogy* as well as to ‘dime-novel westerns’.)⁴¹ If we are to find in *Against the Day* the ontological plurality that McHale attributes to *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Vineland*, do we perhaps need to assume that the culture of the period in which *Against the Day* is set hovered between reality and textual fiction just as postmodern culture hovers between reality and televised fiction? Was the culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – like postmodern culture – an unstable agglomeration of incommensurable ‘modes of being’, which postmodern writing is simply more successful at representing than modernist writing was? It is worth mentioning in this context two arguments from *Postmodernist Fiction*.

The first concerns the role which ‘sub-literary genres’ play in postmodernist writing. Narrative sequences placed under erasure, McHale argues, ‘often draw on the repertoires of peripheral or sub-literary genres [...]. The aim of such sensationalism is to lure the reader into making an emotional investment in the sequence under erasure [...]. Having become “involved” in the representation the reader thus resents it when the representation is *de-represented*, erased’.⁴² I would qualify this by saying that sometimes the converse is true: the reader’s anxiety or guilt about enjoying ‘sub-literary’ discourse, such as pornography, is assuaged by the act of erasure. Pynchon employs exactly this sort of distancing effect in relation to the *Ghastly Fop* episodes of *Mason & Dixon*. The second is the argument, quoted above, that postmodernism literalizes the metaphorical use of the word

world. For McHale, postmodernism's ontological plurality can ultimately be referred back to social, psychological, discursive or epistemological plurality. If we revisit McHale's reading of *Against the Day* in the light of these two arguments, we see that Pynchon's 'genre-poaching' is indeed implicated in both ontological instability and ontological plurality. Ontological instability ensues when sections of the narrative are placed under erasure by being presented as part of the 'sub-literary' Chums of Chance stories. More broadly, the novel's ontological and discursive pluralities are impossible to disentangle. Generic plurality figures ontological plurality. This in turn is rooted in the plurality of 'alternative subcultures, life-styles, values-systems, enclaves of meaning, psychological realities', which was just as much a fact of life in the modernist period as in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. McHale's reading of *Against the Day*, then, is compatible with his over-arching theory about ontological plurality, but only as long as we recognize that McHale's plurality is essentially discursive, and not the more profound plurality McClure argues for. Within that constraint, McHale successfully demonstrates that postmodernist fiction such as Pynchon's is capable not only of representing the plurality of its own postmodern culture, but of finding radical plurality in earlier phases of culture too. Specifically, where *V.* approached the early twentieth century through modernist modes of writing, *Against the Day* postmodernizes that period.⁴³

Postmodern Natives

But does it do so, ironically, after the End of Postmodernism, which people have been declaring since the notorious seminar of that name held in Stuttgart in 1991? Stephen J. Burn has argued that the work of a new generation of novelists including Jonathan Franzen and Richard Powers marks a break with postmodernism, and John N. Duvall has suggested that '[t]o write a text like Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* today would not get one to a thesis defense at most MFA programs'.⁴⁴ Mary K. Holland argues that the writing of Mark Z. Danielewski and others can be seen as a distinctive late postmodernism which achieves a recovery of representation and which regards language as a means of successful communication rather than a prison-house.⁴⁵ Here is what McHale says in 'What was Postmodernism? Or, The Last of the Angels' (and note the contrast with his claim in 1979 that 'we are all, still, modernist readers'): 'Despite being each other's contemporaries in the common-sense view, we are not all postmoderns; some of us are, but others of us are moderns or pre-moderns; perhaps some (or all?) of us are all three at once. Modernisms, postmodernisms, premodernisms, perhaps para-modernisms all co-exist'.⁴⁶ The twenty-first-century Pynchon still fits McHale's

account of postmodernism's ontological dominant, but what has changed – this new claim about co-existence suggests – is Pynchon's readership, implying that 'the unconstrained projection of worlds in the plural' is no longer synonymous with the project of 'de-conditioning' the (modernist) reader.

There are (at least) two ways in which Pynchon's readership has changed since McHale wrote *Postmodernist Fiction*. One is simply a widespread awareness of changed historical circumstance, the sense that the postmodern moment has passed. In McHale's 2011 essay 'Break, Period, Interregnum', he argues that the period from 1989 to 2001 constitutes 'a kind of interregnum' or 'time between' separating postmodernism's 'major phase' from the beginning of a new phase of culture – following the events of September 11th 2001 – which may be 'another mutation in postmodernism' or 'its true end'.⁴⁷ There is a tension between this periodization and the continuing emphasis on Pynchon's postmodernism that Chetwynd identifies as the unifying principle of the *Cambridge Companion*, not to mention McHale's emphatic characterization of *Mason & Dixon* as a 'postmodern historical novel'.⁴⁸ There is not necessarily a contradiction between reading *Against the Day* as a post-9/11 novel, as for example James Gourley does,⁴⁹ and identifying it as a postmodernist text; but to be a postmodernist text arguably means something different after 2001. Likewise, there can be no doubt that *Bleeding Edge* is a novel shaped by the events of September 11th 2001, but that does not preclude classifying it as an example of postmodernist writing. Justin St Clair brilliantly elucidates the way that *Bleeding Edge* 'confronts the legacy of postmodern fiction', 'mocking the cultural backlash against irony, but [...] also issuing a gentle rebuke to the likes of [David Foster] Wallace'. In 2013, St Clair concludes, Pynchon is 'still spinning the same metafictional yarn that supposedly expired sometime back in the 1980s'.⁵⁰ A detailed analysis of *Bleeding Edge*'s engagement with the idea of postmodern irony is beyond the scope of the present essay; let me simply observe that in *Bleeding Edge* the term 'postmodern' has entered Pynchon's lexicon, describing everything from DeepArcher's virtual trains to the architecture of Gabriel Ice's house and the toilets at Tworkeffx, where the prevailing tone is one of 'Nineties irony, a little past its sell-by date'.⁵¹ An NYU professor even lauds Reg Despard for his 'post-postmodern' camera-work.⁵² The discourse of postmodernism is just one more part of the vernacular Pynchon shares with his readership.

This leads on to the second aspect of the change in Pynchon's readership, namely that, as McHale recognizes in his pluralistic ecology of contemporary culture (in which '[m]odernisms, postmodernisms, premodernisms, perhaps

para-modernisms all co-exist'), we are not all, any longer, modernist readers. This is not least because many of us have read Pynchon, and some of us have also read the diverse theorists of postmodernism, including McHale. The Pynchon who describes himself in the cover blurb for *Against the Day* as 'up to his usual business'⁵³ is not a writer still in the antagonistic relationship with his readers that McHale describes with regard to *Gravity's Rainbow*, a writer intent on 'de-conditioning' readers set in interpretative habits proper to an earlier era of fiction.⁵⁴ St Clair is right to say that *Bleeding Edge* 'isn't just a novel that recycles, nor is it merely a novel that knows it recycles'; it is 'a novel that knows that its readers know that it recycles'.⁵⁵ A pertinent analogy might be drawn with the reading of Danielewski's *House of Leaves* advanced by Holland, who argues that *House of Leaves* 'operate[s] within an already established linguistic crisis rather than defining it'.⁵⁶ Similarly, I would suggest, the twenty-first-century Pynchon and his readers are quite at home in the postmodern plurality of worlds. This is an argument that has already been won; Pynchon and his peers have succeeded in 'de-conditioning the reader', aided and abetted, perhaps, by what Michael Chabon calls 'the Pynchonization of consensus reality'.⁵⁷

In the 1970s and 80s Brian McHale argued that *Gravity's Rainbow* resists a certain mode of reading, pointedly thwarting the reader's attempts to synthesize a single consistent ontology from its narratives. The reader who comes to Pynchon's twenty-first-century novels having read *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Vineland* and *Mason & Dixon* will understand herself, I submit, to have been long since released from any obligation to attempt such a synthesis. This is, partly, what differentiates the postmodernist reader from the modernist reader. David Cowart points out in his contribution to the *Cambridge Companion* that '[i]n film, in television, in politics and public discourse, in literature high and low, and even in children's entertainments, postmodernism seems increasingly a default mode, something woven into the very fabric of the cultural moment'.⁵⁸ This being the case, many younger readers will be what we may term 'postmodern natives': raised on film, television and literature in the 'default mode' of postmodernism, they will accept Pynchon's pluralism without any need for 'de-conditioning', having never been 'modernist readers' in the first place. Any conception of the postmodernist reader must also take into account the greater diversity of people – people belonging to a broader range of genders, sexualities, ethnicities and class backgrounds – who have over the past fifty years won for themselves admission to the category of 'reader' in academic and public discourse. In the Zone that these processes of pluralization have opened up, new questions, new possibilities, arise: McHale's reading of *Against the Day*

and Pynchon's preoccupations in *Bleeding Edge* alike suggest that among these is a renewed concern for 'truth'.

End notes

1. McHale, 'Pynchon's Postmodernisms' 97.
2. Chetwynd 142-3.
3. McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 3-25.
4. McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* 61-86.
5. Pöhlmann 9, 33.
6. *Ibid.* 16, 11.
7. *Ibid.* 32.
8. Chetwynd 145.
9. Hume 141-63.
10. Harvey, 'To Cry from Within or Without?'. McHale himself has retreated from this position, explicitly terming *The Crying of Lot 49* 'a postmodernist novel' in 'What was Postmodernism?' (§3, para. 4), a point which Harvey oddly fails to register.
11. McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* 83. In a note, McHale directs the reader to the work of Maarten van Delden, who 'specifies that these [*sic*] are the norms of New Critical (i.e. institutionalized, pedagogical) modernism' (280).
12. Rose, 'Interview'.
13. For an overview see Bertens 111-37.
14. Jameson, *Postmodernism* 1.
15. Strandenberg 107, 109.
16. McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* 81.
17. McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 10. Emphasis McHale's.
18. Auerbach, *Mimesis* 536. Auerbach also recognized that 'modern writers' could offer 'a challenge to the reader's will to interpretive synthesis' (549), a point which might be seen to trouble McHale's periodizing theory.
19. McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 21-5.
20. McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* 131-7.
21. McHale, 'What was Postmodernism? or, The Last of the Angels' 49.
22. McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 79.
23. *Postmodernist Fiction* 165.

24. McClure, *Partial Faiths* 28. McClure cites McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 44-5.
25. Berlatsky 125, 133.
26. McHale, 'Mason & Dixon in the Zone' 46.
27. Ibid., 46-9.
28. Berlatsky 23.
29. Recall, for example, the passage quoted above which credits Pynchon with being 'perhaps the preeminent practitioner' of 'the variety of postmodernist writing exemplified by *Gravity's Rainbow*': McHale is – perhaps – saying something more here than that Pynchon is the best writer around at writing books like *Gravity's Rainbow*, but not much more.
30. Macherey 21.
31. Wood, *Broken Estate* 202-6.
32. McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* 63.
33. Ariga para. 8.
34. McHale, 'Genre as History' 25.
35. McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 21, 25.
36. Berressem 42-50, 201-42.
37. McHale, 'Genre as History' 19-22.
38. McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* 131, 137.
39. McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 128.
40. McHale, 'Genre as History' 18.
41. Ibid., 23.
42. *Postmodernist Fiction* 102.
43. This is consistent, too, with Pöhlmann's reading, cited above, although I have framed my argument in such a way as to preserve the classification of *Against the Day* as a postmodernist text while Pöhlmann is more inclined to question it. Where McHale finds a plurality which – as I have shown – is not incompatible with 'truth', Pöhlmann makes *Against the Day* a 'complex' text which combines 'real' and 'imaginary' elements without succumbing to 'postmodern excesses' and 'too easily conflating' the two (Pöhlmann 32).
44. Burn, 'End of Postmodernism' 227-32; Duvall 6.
45. Holland, *Succeeding Postmodernism* 15-17.
46. McHale, 'What was Postmodernism? or, The Last of the Angels' 40.

47. 'Break, Period, Interregnum' 331-8.
48. Ibid., 339. Compare also '*Mason & Dixon in the Zone*', discussed above.
49. Gourley 105-9.
50. St Clair para. 8.
51. Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge* 76, 191, 306, 301.
52. Ibid., 9.
53. Pynchon, 'Blurb'.
54. And an earlier era of criticism: see note 11 above.
55. St Clair para. 2.
56. Holland 99.
57. Chabon §1, para. 7.
58. Cowart 95.

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