ISSN: 2044-4095

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Title: Review of *Bleeding Edge*, by Thomas Pynchon
Date: 2013
Volume: 2
Issue: 1
URL: https://www.pynchon.net/owap/article/view/51
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.7766/orbit.v2.1.51

Abstract:

A review of Thomas Pynchon's forthcoming novel, *Bleeding Edge*.

Review of *Bleeding Edge*, by Thomas Pynchon

Albert Rolls

Thomas Pynchon's latest novel, *Bleeding Edge*, the third Pynchon has published since 2006, will likely be received as one of his lighter offerings. The plot follows the now unlicensed fraud investigator Maxine Tarnow as she looks into the dealings of hashslingrz, the dotcom run by Gabriel Ice, the novel's villain, and sustains a fairly straight storyline, despite Maxine's straying into a number of sometimes only loosely related inquiries and its resisting, in typically Pynchonesque fashion, tidy closure. The lightness, like that of Pynchon's other short novels, is deceptive. *Bleeding Edge* is not simply the tale of Maxine's investigation but an examination of the cultural direction America is headed in—has been headed in for over half a century—and of the effect the Internet and the 11 September, 2001, terrorist attacks have had on the pace with which we continue in that direction or find reasons to resist doing so. *Bleeding Edge*, then, is as much an inquiry into the mysteries of contemporary American life as it is into the mysteries of hashslingrz' corporate activities. To look for closure in such a mystery would be to expect Pynchon to have taken on the role of a soothsayer rather than a novelist.

Not far into her investigation in the novel, Maxine looks up Rockwell "Rocky" Slagiatt (whose name is an acronym for "seemed like a good idea at the time"), an Italian-American venture capitalist and assumed *Mafioso* who had invested in a company, hwgaahwgh, with which hashslingrz may not have had entirely legitimate business dealings. Following their meeting, the two go to lunch. The episode opens with Slagiatt's arguing with the waiter over the pronunciation of pasta e fagioli, an exchange that segues into mafia-inspired banter between Slagiatt and the restaurant owner over whacking the waiter for his refusal to accept that he is mistaken. The exchanges are shtick, pop cultural inspired parodies of Italian life: Slagiatt references Dean Martin's "That's Amore" in his argument, and the talk of whacking reminds the waiter of his work as an extra on *The Sopranos*. Rocky's routine, however, is more than comedy; it is part of his attempt to maintain ties with his cultural

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roots, an element of his character that is also evidenced by his phone's ringtone, "Una furtiva lagrima," a *romanza* from Gaetano Donizetti's opera *L'elisir d'amore,* and by his response to Maxine's use of the expression "you folks" (66). She seems to mean capitalists, but Slagiatt understands Italian Americans: "Us folks, ancient stuff, Lucky Luciano, the OSS, please. Forget it. Old *cafones*, most of em dead by now, families go on of course, younger generations sometimes may feel some respect for the history, but a kid coming up now, too many other demands on their attention, forget loyalty, they build these instant families with the Internet, it might not be deeper than blood but it's a hell of a lot more populated" (66–67).

Rocky's nostalgia for a time when associates made the effort to forge deeper connections and when history mattered—a history he is aware of, as his reference to the OSS, the U.S. intelligence organization that recruited first-generation Italian immigrants for operations in Italy during WWII, demonstrates—touches on a larger concern of *Bleeding Edge,* the loss of life's depth, what Pynchon characterizes as the development of "some stupefied consensus about what life is to be" (51) on a grand scale. The problem is not only attributable to the rise of the Internet with its easy connections and large populations but also to the transformative power of capital and the politicians who support it, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, for example. This aspect of the novel manifests itself in its exploration of such changes to the New York City landscape as the sterilization of Time Square through the removal of its so-called undesirable elements and its accompanying Disneyfication. Such changes are analogues to the emergence of the virtual communities to which Rocky makes reference. The process, Pynchon acknowledges, isn't exactly new: there was the co-op frenzy of the eighties and the uprooting of Puerto Ricans to make way for Lincoln Center in the fifties. Indeed, Pynchon had made the connection between commercialization and the flattening of life's choices as early as 1962, complaining in a letter from Seattle to Kirkpatrick Sale in May of that year that "little old ladies on relief have been evicted to make way for tourists" coming to town for the Seattle World Fair. Pynchon condemned the fair as an excuse for retailers to raise prices and promised to boycott it, just as Maxine has "made a conscious effort not to go near" (51) Time Square since it was cleaned up. He went on to worry that if Seattle's city planners get their way, "Skid Road will go, the winos will be made to shave and join AA, they'll turn Pioneer Square into a parking lot."[1]

Rocky's understanding of the Internet, confined as it seems to be to the workings of the surface Web, is limited, and the novel provides a broader

perspective. In fact, in the first two-thirds or so of the novel, Pynchon offers a glimmer of hope for escaping the "stupefied consensus"—partial though the escape may be and already under threat—in the possibilities afforded by the Deep Web, to which DeepArcher, named for its homonymic relationship to "departure," gives Maxine her first access by way of a virtual train station, a counterpart to the station encountered at the opening of *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). *Bleeding Edge*'s station is filled with "soaring meta-Victorian glass- and iron-modulated light" (76) rather than darkness and the looming spectacle of "the fall of a crystal palace" (1, *GR*). March Kelleher, the old leftist activist whose estranged daughter, Tallis, is married to Ice, has a better appreciation of what is going on, explaining the dynamic of the Internet by contrasting dotcommers "who make real-estate developers look like Bambi and Thumper" and kids who possess an idealism that hasn't been seen since the sixties. The latter "are out to change the world. 'Information has to be free'—they really mean it" (116). The former, meanwhile, are intent on containing the surface Web and bringing the Deep Web, or the parts it will benefit them to raise, to the surface; monetizing the endeavor; confining us to what are, in effect, electronic malls; and, when that is not possible, overwhelming us or allowing us to overwhelm ourselves "with too much to look at" so that "nothing will mean shit" (141), as Reg Despard, Maxine's nominal client on the hashslingrz ticket, recognizes.

Of course, counterforces, outlaws, as Maxine refers to herself at one point (173), who belong neither to the straight nor criminal world, or those on the borderlines—an idea played with in a gag involving Maxine getting stuck on an annual cruise of borderline personalities in the opening pages but that emerges as a more serious, if only subtly rendered, presence later on—persist, will always persists. Their power, which usually exerts its influence slowly, lies in their ability to instill "criticisms of the regime [into] . . . the collective consciousness" (113) of the people, a notion March develops in the parable of the city ruler and the bag lady that she tells to a graduating class of the Otto Kugelblitz School, the eponymous founder of which—an outlaw himself in Maxine's sense—was expelled from Freud's inner circle for positing that life consisted of a series of stages through different psychological disorders and established his elementary school on the assumption that each grade level represents "a different kind of mental condition" (3). In the present moment, in the midst of the Web's "adolescent angst," as the promotional material for *Bleeding Edge,* almost certainly written by Pynchon, puts it, such outlaws, at least those among them with computer chops, seem to have found in the Deep Web a home, one they are aware won't always be

there for them. Similarly, there are hints that an event, one that will further limit play in the real world, is looming.

The event turns out to be the terrorist attack of 11 September, which does not so much change the nation as provide a rallying cause around which consensus can be justified and embraced or enforced. The need to control the story quickly supplants the human side of events—brought close to the reader through Maxine's and their children's concern for Maxine's by-then only semi- ex-husband Horst Loeffler, who may or may not have been in his office at the World Trade Center the morning of the attack. Voices of dissent emerge, particularly "in the vast undefined anarchism of cyber space" (326), but their value resides not so much in the theories they put forth as in their insistence on wanting to see beyond what the media is telling them. Even March, who quickly shifts "into what she calls her old-lefty tirade mode" (320) to question media accounts on her blog, recognizes that the alternative narratives, whether they are true or untrue, should be attended to. Commenting on monetary graffiti from a dollar bill that claims the CIA was responsible for bringing down the Trade Center, she observes, "Call it what you like, but a historical document whatever" (321). The emerging official narrative, by contrast, ignores rather than counters such claims. More perniciously, it infuses traces of its perspective into the language that we become obliged to use to talk about what happened. Take, for example, "Ground Zero," the name given to the former World Trade Center site. It is "a Cold War term taken from the scenarios of nuclear war so popular in the early sixties. This was nowhere near a Soviet nuclear strike on downtown Manhattan, yet those who repeat 'Ground Zero' over and over do so without shame or concern for etymology. The purpose is to get people cranked up in a certain way. Cranked up, scared, and helpless" (327).

Because of the prevalence of such terms, the sound of dissidence risks echoing the voice of officialdom every time it names the site where the atrocity took place. It is as if that site were a product, the brand name of which has been genericised without having to compete with an alternative brand, and the press, "the Newspaper of Record" (326) in particular, just a medium through which to conduct the advertising campaign. A glitch that appeared on the evening of 10 September and that allows DeepArcher to be found, a glitch Maxine comes to think of as the "11 September window of vulnerability," also enables the transformation of that portal to the Deep Web, turning it, for all intents and purposes, into a cyber-replica of the kind of advertising medium the press has become: "Advertising everywhere. On walls, on the clothing and skin of crowd extras . . . [and] lurking around the entrance to a Starbucks,

a pair of cyberflaneurs" (354). *Bleeding Edge* presents itself as a counter-discourse on 9/11, counter to neither official nor alternative narratives but to the language that has turned those narratives into advertising mediums that have "infantilized" (335) the nation. The narrator, for instance, avoids using the other term that is repeated over and over to lull us into conformity, "9/11," which appears in the text in that form only once (324), when Avi, Maxine's brother-in-law, is discounting the theory that the attack was an Israeli plot. Instead, Pynchon, following European custom, renders the date as "11 September," the form he also uses when dating his letters but which takes on added significance in the context of what was being called a 9/11 novel even before advanced reading copies were released.[2]

The text's inability to posit an alternative to the official story that irks it, or at least a clear alternative to the often thoughtless behaviors in which Americans indulged in response to 9/11, may suggest that we must resign ourselves to the way things have turned out, but there is hope beyond the hope offered and taken away in the Web. It is presented in the guise of the younger generation's resistance to the way things are, something symbolically presented early in the novel in the form of a video game for kids called If Looks Could Kill, a sort of *Grand Theft Auto* without blood splatter in which players drive around a city, kill Yuppies (or Yups as the novel calls them), and spirit children away to healthier environments. More pointed is the framing device Pynchon employs. The novel opens with Maxine walking her sons, Otis and Ziggy, to school, even though "maybe they're past the age where they need an escort" (1) and concludes with an act of spontaneous independence on their part. Maxine arrives home too late to get them ready for school, just as they are about to leave the apartment. Resisting her inclination to make them wait for her, she instead watches from the doorway "as they go on down the hall. Neither looks back" (479). They (or the younger generation) do not need to be guided by their elders' hands, and we may find encouragement in the prospect that they don't want to be.

End notes

1. Letter to Kirkpatrick Sale May 28, 1962.
2. See, for example, Pappademas.

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