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**Abstract:**

Review of Maniez, Claire, Ronan Ludot-Vlasak, and Frederic Dumas, eds., *Science and American Literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries: From Henry Adams to John Adams* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012).

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## Review of *Science and American Literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries*

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In her introduction to *Science and American Literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries*, editor Claire Maniez writes that the collection of essays opens up a cross-disciplinary dialogue with the Snovian Disjunction (Pynchon's term), the division between the disciplines of science and literature highlighted in C.P. Snow's infamous work *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (1959). While Snow claims that scientific illiteracy is rife within literature, this collection endeavours to show that literature and science can find common ground.

The essays within the collection demonstrate a broad engagement with science across American fiction. Noëlle Batt's essay 'A Comparative Epistemology for Literary Theory and Neurosciences' claims that the similarities between literature and high-order consciousness could be used as modelling systems to solve problems in both literature and neuroscience, while Yves Abrioux's *Alan Turing's Imitation Game and the Literary Imagination* claims that literature can enlighten scientific problems in ways the discipline itself cannot. The next section deals with the moral 'gate-keeping' of science, the most interesting paper being Mathieu Duplay's paper on John Adams's *Doctor Atomic*, which analyses nuclear terror and scientific morality. The final part deals with how technology affects the physicality of the text, with some compelling papers on digital production and hypertextuality.

The volume starts with a paper on Henry Adams (what volume on science and literature could not?) by Denis Diderot, which deftly explores Adams's theological metaphors for new technology (*The Dynamo and the Virgin*) as a well as the problem of mistranslation between the public and scientific that Adams highlighted, the "utter disunity through the mediation of abstruse scientific statements" (p. 16) that Gilles Chamerois returns to in his essay on Pynchon. For the sake of this review, I will mostly be covering the two

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Pynchon essays in detail, particularly to highlight how recent Pynchon work fits alongside a wider collection of criticism and recent scientifically minded critiques, and also (and more basically) to review Pynchon critique that is not published in the more focused and insular collections to which Pynchon critics are accustomed. The two Pynchon papers do not deal as directly with Snow as the introduction implies, but it is Pynchon's constant engagement with politics and scientific theory that has always worked to undermine Snow's allegations, most prominently in 1984's 'Is it O.K. to be a Luddite?'

One further note: I will not claim that the rest of the collection holds no interest to the Pynchon critic, as there is material on John Adams (Cold War paranoia and the nuclear threat), Philip K Dick (the ethics of technology) and Robert Coover (the hypertext movement) that have much in common with the work currently being undertaken in our field.

### Deadpan to Demonic – Subtextual uses of Science in Thomas Pynchon's *Inherent Vice*, Bénédicte Chorier-Fryd

The first essay on Pynchon in the collection focuses on the scientific metaphors in *Inherent Vice*, charting Pynchon's transition from the overarching scientific metaphors used in *Lot 49* and *Slow Learner* into a more subtextual use of science as a literary device. Chorier-Fryd's analysis is insightful if conservative, reaching interesting points about the text that remain heavily indebted to the ontological problems outlined in Pynchon's earlier career. The familiar Pynchonian trope of entropy is unearthed, as well as the ways in which *Inherent Vice* is framed around quantum theory, and Chorier-Fryd shows a sensitivity in her work that demonstrates how these models operate discreetly within the text. A more fluid and playful Pynchon is revealed, incorporating a more subtle approach to scientific theories in stark contrast to the structured seriousness of his earlier novels.

Chorier-Fryd's essay retraces familiar ground rather well, and we see an approach to scientific content that analyses *Inherent Vice* through the lens of *Lot 49*, 'Entropy' and 'Under the Rose'. Her analysis of Doc as a private eye figure is a marriage of informational theory and quantum mechanics, where the novel retraces the chaotic causality of the plot back to some distant point of origin. What Chorier-Fryd is keen to point out in the paper is how hidden and subtle these scientific tropes are in *Inherent Vice*, where they 'loom *sub rosa*' (p. 24) within the text. Unfortunately the paper contains insufficient engagement with similar or contemporary criticism, and ignores wholly the recent and nuanced approaches to the subject. A work like this should be engaging with new criticism like de Bourcier's *Pynchon and Relativity*:

*Narrative Time in Thomas Pynchon's Later Novels*, which deals with very similar scientific themes.

The real strength of the paper is Chorier-Fryd's use of the quantum uncertainty of Pynchon's universe to explore the shifting geography of California. California is no longer 'solid as the axes of space'(p. 25) but as prone to uncertainty and entropic decay as the narrative itself. While Chorier-Fryd analyses *Inherent Vice* through the familiar scientific filters seen in *V* and *Lot 49*, there are hints of a more ecologically and geographically minded Pynchon here. She manages to show a writer less interested in the entropy of information and more in the entropy of land, space and communities - a shift in focus that reminds us of the political geography present in texts like *Vineland* and *Mason & Dixon*.

Chorier-Fryd also depicts a looser, 'impish' (p. 29) Pynchon, where the scientific elements of the novel are deployed with more subtlety than previous texts. The familiar scientific tropes are no longer governing the narrative, but instead part of the plural and fluctuating world. Chorier-Fryd shows that Pynchon 'does not abide by any clear principles' (p. 23) but instead allows *Inherent Vice's* uncertainty to be underpinned by scientific theories instead of being governed by them. She posits that the scientific material in the text is 'informing' the structure of the narrative as opposed to the macro-level it worked on in prior texts. Chorier-Fryd's essay goes some way to justify a fresher engagement with tired scientific topoi in Pynchon's work, but it is incomplete in showing us how *Inherent Vice* progresses in this sense beyond the notion of Pynchon becoming a more seasoned writer.

### From Bosons to Titans: the Genealogy of Science in Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*, Gilles Chamerois

As a complement to the other Pynchon piece, Gilles Chamerois provides a more focused and historical close reading of Pynchon's scientific content. The essay frames its argument around the division between the scientific and the literary via the Snovian Disjunction, and how *Mason & Dixon* goes some way to reconcile these two poles.

The first part of Chamerois' argument is a reaction to Snovian thinking itself. He uses the impenetrability of *Mason & Dixon's* nautical language to highlight the problem of inclusivity within science itself, and how (via Friedrich Durrenmatt) such linguistic isolation can result in the 'ghettoization' of disciplines. Instead Chamerois posits that Pynchon uses language and metaphor to disrupt the enclosed 'symmetry' of dry science. This is not a case of literary metaphor versus dry analysis in Pynchon, but an acceptance

that science has literary merit in itself, in that “science uses metaphors too.” (p. 33) A Snovian division between the two worlds is not a simple one, as both disciplines use metaphor, and “not all metaphors are fertilizing.” (p. 33) Chamerois suggests that both science and literature can share the same problem, where both “fundamental incomprehension” and “free-wheeling metaphor” (p. 33) are counter-productive.

The second part of the argument explores the scientific undercurrents of the text, and how Pynchon develops a model of science that behaves fractally. Here Chamerois explores the importance of fractals in *Mason & Dixon*, from the geographic and spatial problems within the text (mapmaking, coastlines, and the boundaries of America) to discussions of causality and chaos theory. Chamerois highlights these scientific anachronisms within the novel, claiming that this literary translation of modern scientific theory reflects the more inclusive “common language” (p. 36) between literature, philosophy and science in the eighteenth century. This is contained within a fluid engagement with Hanjo Berressem’s work on Michel Serres.

The third part continues the discussion on the anachronistic science in the text. Using Zofia Kolbuszewska’s work on fractals in Pynchon’s work, Chamerois claims that the advance of America as a state and of scientific progress itself are not teleological, but leave us with a nation with “infinite hope in its possibilities” (Kolbuszewska, p. 37) and a scientific progression that “does little more than to displace the limits of the unknown.” (p. 37) Of course, this is not as fresh a perspective in Pynchon as Chamerois suggests, as such a metaphor is fertile within the more resistant passages of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. He nonetheless continues into a close analysis of how fractals work in both the novel and the scientific world in a manner that requires a greater knowledge of the history and philosophy of science that a journeyman Pynchon critic may currently have. However, there are some insights on *Mason & Dixon* tracing scientific progress in reverse (from twentieth-century theories back towards pre-enlightenment mythography) that will prove very fruitful to anyone interested in Pynchon’s use of history and scientific progress.

Of the other papers, I would like to briefly discuss Stéphane Vanderhaeghe’s essay ‘Robert Coover, or the Adventures of the Novel in the Age of Digital Production.’ Vanderhaeghe uses a close reading of Coover’s work (principally 2002’s *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre*) to explore the nature of hypertexts, and their limitations on the page (as opposed to Shelley Jackson’s digital hypertexts.)

Vanderhaeghe argues that Coover began his hypertextual work at the supposed end of the 'Age of Science,' and that a new novel form is required in an age that has reached its limits. This need becomes catered for by a 'non-sequential' form of writing where the reader becomes the fictionist, but as Vanderhaeghe stresses in her paper, this still produces limited reading options while still in print format (print can be read as hypertext, but hypertext sometimes cannot translate to print). Her close reading of *Lucky Pierre* is a compelling take on a contemporary of Pynchon, and it highlights the shared influence of Borges ('The Garden of Forking Paths') as well demonstrating a textual interplay with music, film and pornography. Coover allows the reader to structure the narrative, much as Pynchon's earlier work allows the paranoia of the reader to imply meaning. While being an exhaustive analysis of Coover and hypertexts themselves, the paper opens up some relevant questions about hypertexts that could inform potential Pynchon criticism. Could Pynchon's own narrative breakdown (seen most clearly in the closing chapters of *Gravity's Rainbow*) also be read hypertextually? Does Pynchon engage at all with this emergent new literary form that was taking shape during his own early career?

The collection as a whole manages to transcend its goal of disrupting the Snovian disjunction and provides varied and often esoteric critiques of how science functions in modern American texts. Both of the Pynchon papers manage to display a scientifically literate author, but seasoned Pynchon critics will already be well aware of his consistent engagement with science and technology. Chorier-Fryd's paper provides a conservative and familiar approach which is reminiscent of Tanner, Mendelson and Slade, which works well as a primer for those interested in Pynchon, but I fear it lacks the depth and engagement with newer criticism that those in the field now look for. Chamerois' paper is more in line with the focused and explorative work we see in current book length studies, and runs parallel to recent interest in cartographical and geographical readings of Pynchon we see from Jared Smith ("All Maps Were Useless": Resisting Genre and Recovering Spirituality in *Against the Day*), Sam Thomas's political take, and a re-emerging interest in Hanjo Berressem's work on Serres and *Mason & Dixon*. Chorier-Fryd does indeed expand into this new geographical critical space, but falls short of the innovative depth that Chamerois reaches. Overall, the two papers work both as lucid and persuasive arguments well situated in this broader study, and as evidence that there are still depths of a 'scientific Pynchon' left to explore.

One question arises from the Pynchon criticism here that is not a critic of the work present, but of the writer himself. Alongside American writers

who are engaging with neuroscience and digitalia, are Pynchon's latest engagements with science progressive drafts of his older concerns, or new territory entirely? In the face of the more avant-garde engagements with science and technology being undertaken by American writers, where can we situate Pynchon in the modern day?

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