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Abstract:

Part of what established Pynchon as postmodern was his piling up of multiple realities. Hence, the surprise that *Inherent Vice* retains only the most attenuated forms of such worlds alternative to our own. In earlier fiction, we find a world served by the Tristero postal system, a world inhabited by angels, by thanatoids and other forms of the dead, by Japanese film monsters, by giant vegetables. In Pynchon's fictive realities, an airship can sail beneath desert sand or through the center of the globe via Symmes's Hole, and the photograph of a corpse can be run backward in time to show its murderer. Up through *Against the Day*, Pynchon showered us with alternate realities that reached beyond the material world that most of us accept as *alles, was der Fall ist*. *Inherent Vice* departs from this vision. Has Pynchon simply grown up? Or grown old? Or is something else operating here? I will provide a brief taxonomy of Pynchon's multiple worlds as characterized by paranoia, mysticism, religion, and humor and then analyze what remains of these in *Inherent Vice*. Among the causes for his changed technique may be his choice of genre. The detective story is epistemological rather than ontological in its questions, so Pynchon concerns himself far more with what Doc Sportello can know than with making him navigate through multiple realities. I argue, however, that *Inherent Vice* is surprisingly a worst-case scenario for Pynchon.

Pynchon's Alternate Realities from *V.* to *Inherent Vice*

Kathryn Hume

Thomas Pynchon's fiction is famed for its multiple worlds or levels of reality. Brian McHale calls such alternatives in *Mason & Dixon* "subjunctive space, the space of wish and desire, of the hypothetical and the counterfactual, of speculation and possibility." In that novel, the many unrealized spaces spread horizontally, whereas in *Gravity's Rainbow*, they stack vertically. (McHale "Mason" 44, 57). In *V.*, reality is apparently manipulated by the travels of a woman whose name begins with that letter. California ceases to belong to ordinary reality when Oedipa discovers the Tristero postal system in *The Crying of Lot 49*. Angels, thanatoids, and ghosts populate Pynchon's landscapes. Japanese film monsters, giant vegetables, airships that can sail beneath desert sand or through the world via Symmes' Hole, elemental Light (with its mystical qualities), holy cities, landmarks supported by ley lines, an alternative Chicago devoted to atonement, portals to other parts of this earth or perhaps to other worlds: Pynchon offers us all of these and more. In William Ashline's terms, his alternative worlds are mostly transgressions of ontological levels, or they follow both paths at a fork, or violate the law of non-contradiction. Early in Pynchon's career, his insistence on alternate realities was part of what made him an exemplary postmodern writer. Up through *Against the Day* (2006), Pynchon showered us with dimensions that reached beyond the material world, the limited reality that most of us accept as Wittgenstein's *alles, was der Fall ist* (*V.* 278).

Inherent Vice (2009) represents a substantive departure from this vision. It alludes briefly to such alternate realms, but they have faded and become distanced, not nearly as demandingly present as in most of the earlier fiction. What are we to make of this different attitude toward the material world in *Inherent Vice*? Has Pynchon simply grown up? Or grown old? Has he reached the position of Margaret Fuller, who exclaimed "I accept the universe!"—to which Thomas Carlyle responded, "Gad, she'd better!" (cited in James, 41). Or is something else operating here? One possible factor attaches to

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his choice of genre. The detective story is epistemological, not ontological, in its orientation, and so is less inclined to play with the nature of reality (McHale *Postmodernist* 16). Obviously Pynchon could have postmodernized the detective story as he did in *The Crying of Lot 49*, but *Inherent Vice* does little to destabilize our ontology.

I suggest that what Pynchon is doing in *Inherent Vice* is exploring a worst-case scenario: nothing exists beyond what we see in the material world. This is worst-case in a highly specific way. The lives we see people leading in this novel are as good or better than those in his others, and my calling this a worst-case scenario says nothing about the various levels of pessimism about human nature in any of his books. Martin Paul Eve (929) speaks of Pynchon's "hopeful hopelessness," a brilliant description of the modest hopes and cultural despair that characterize the novels. I call this worst-case simply because we are stuck with what we have. No other level of reality offers us any escape or compensation or alternative or hope. Nothing immaterial will redeem the material nature of existence. All of his novels take a gloomy view of harmful human actions in the material world, and I am not ranking them according to their degree of pessimism. I simply emphasize that his earlier work keeps suggesting that possible alternative realities exist beyond that everyday realm. Indeed, Seán Molloy goes so far as to claim that earth (in the middle) is bonded to Hell (below), but that transcending will permit a few elect to escape to the higher realm. In jettisoning such often-acknowledged levels of reality and all their variants, Pynchon is putting aside his subjunctive spaces of desire and his hope for improvement. Instead, he asks how we should live within a reality shaped by historical blunders and the endless cruelties spawned by "imperial illegitimacy" (Coward 165), a reality that cannot be redeemed by an angel; life will not even be improved by a Japanese movie monster stepping on a villain. In *Inherent Vice*, he constructs an image of life unsoftened even by the promise of afterlife. Nothing substantive exists beyond what we see. Given Pynchon's fascination with breakthroughs to other levels of reality in all his other fiction, this appears to be an impoverishing and disquieting prospect for him.

Pynchon's Alternate Realities

To try to determine what sets *Inherent Vice* apart, I would like first to taxonomize Pynchon's alternate realities. He has so many that this can only be a rough approximation, but we need to see what he has been pushing before we can make sense of his present letting up. As a first stab at that taxonomy, I suggest that his alternatives can be characterized as paranoid,

spiritual (which includes both mystical and religious), and humorous. *V.* (1963), *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) augment ordinary reality in ways that are primarily paranoid (Sanders). Those worlds extend beyond the material level with sinister networks and connections that make readers or the characters uneasy. *Gravity's Rainbow* and subsequent novels balance such paranoia with mysticism expressed primarily in terms of light, and with elements taken from a variety of religions—souls existing after death, concern with sin and atonement, and rebirth. While Pynchon alludes to a variety of belief systems (Eddins, McClure, Jarvis), he perhaps emphasizes Christianity (Coe, Hume, Molloy) and Buddhism (Kohn). While measuring the amount or intensity of paranoia in any novel would be difficult, *Against the Day* seems to me the least paranoid as of that date. Yes, Yale-educated tycoons form sinister networks of shared interests, but the villainous Scarsdale Vibe is no worse than others of his era when it comes to rubbing out labor agitators, and when he is shot, he dies and has no postmortem powers. Paranoia may not fade at an even rate throughout Pynchon's career, but it does seem to be diminishing as of *Against the Day*.

Paranoia in Pynchon's novels works in two principal ways. One is the claim that a system exists that we simply have not suspected. *V* is present at various political flash-points from the end of the nineteenth century on into World War II. While the *V*-named woman (or women) does not seem to wield much influence and seems primarily to be an enthusiastic observer of violence, her presence (if it is the same woman) links what seem like separate political embroglios, and suggests connections between, for example, post-Von Trotha Germans in Southwest Africa with Germans of World War II, but her presence also connects Fashoda to cultural riots in Paris and British resistance on Malta. The equivalent unexpected network in *The Crying of Lot 49* is the unofficial mail system. It links disaffected groups marginalized by mainstream America, and leads Oedipa to discover and acknowledge segments of the American population about whom she had known nothing.

The other sort of paranoia might just be called a form of cynicism, the assumed linkage of corrupt elements to form controlling systems. In *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), Pynchon can see no hope for any organization to be free of inherent tyrannies; even the Red Cross is disparaged (*GR* 600), so any form of government is doomed to be corrupt and exploitive because its hierarchy exists to exercise Control with a capital C. The only escape from the evils of control is for individuals to operate on their own in a black market—that is, in a non-official system where one's word is the only guarantee and little can be done to punish those who violate the rules. Anything exercising control is

similarly distrusted in *Vineland* (1990) and the same is largely true in *Mason & Dixon* (1997), where control is emblemized by the institution of slavery. In *Vineland*, however, and even more in later works, we start to find slight exceptions to this blanket condemnation. The People's Republic of Rock and Roll is a temporary fling rather than a serious political move. Because it fails to integrate the working class and labor movement, it remains the plaything of relatively rich kids, and provocateurs bring about its downfall. However, it embodies Pynchon's utopian and communal longings, and signifies an escape from control as well as exhibiting longings to transcend.

We see those longings more developed in the airship *Inconvenience* that operates as lone agent in *Against the Day*. It may negotiate payloads for legitimate markets rather than the black market, but like Slothrop in the Zone, it is answerable only to itself and can depend on little but itself—though the contracts it draws up suggest reliance on legal systems. Everywhere else, we see corruption and control, but Pynchon tries thought experiments—or so I would call them—in how to escape those evils attached to systems. Molloy treats the airship as Pynchon's considered political ideal. Eve (931) points out that historically, it is “sailing towards the ‘grace’ of World War II and contemporary capitalism,” so this hopeful-sounding ending may be less utopian than the words imply. However, *Inconvenience* rose above World War I, so possibly it will transcend the later conflict as well.

When we move from the paranoid realities to the mystic and religious, which I am generally calling spiritual, the valance changes from negative to largely positive. They too impose systems on the world, but theirs offer powers that give, not just take or oppress. They offer something extra that might, conceivably, be wanted or attractive. Many have been identified by John A. McClure as what he calls “postsecular” turns toward partial faith. They also belong to the broader impulse that Peter Brooks calls the melodramatic imagination, “a way of perceiving and imaging the spiritual in a world where there is no longer any clear idea of the sacred, no generally accepted societal moral imperatives, where the body of the ethical has become a sort of *deus absconditus* which must be sought for, posited, brought into man's existence through exercise of the spiritualist imagination” (209).

Take the idea of a holy city. We get a negative or paranoid version of that fantasy in *V.*, the realm of Vheissu, which seems at first to be a desirable place reached, like Shambhala of *Against the Day* or James Hilton's Shangri-La by a long journey through harsh and dangerous landscapes. The inhabitants are sophisticated if they distil perfume from the wings of black moths or depict battles of the gods and produce haunting music. Godolphin remembers it for

"The colors. So many colors" (V. 170), and in other Pynchon books, intensified colors are usually positive. However, Godolphin comes to feel that what one sees in Vheissu is all ornamentation and no soul, and he pictures it as a woman tattooed all over on whom he soon wishes leprosy to destroy the superficial patterns and colors. Vheissu pursues him; its agents plant a frozen native spider monkey in the ice at the South Pole, so when he gets there, he knows he is not the first to reach the pole, and he refers to Vheissu as "That feral and lunatic dominion" (V. 205). Godolphin speculates "If Eden was the creation of God, God only knows what evil created Vheissu" (V. 206). He sums it up as "a dream of annihilation" (V. 206). Perhaps related is the negative strain of imagery in *Gravity's Rainbow* where cities are associated with grids and channels and control.

The positive version of this is Shambhala, a holy city found in *Against the Day*. The name Shambhala comes from Buddhist tradition, and the location is somewhere in Central Asia. As the airship approaches it, however, that airship undergoes an instantaneous transfer to Belgium. One crew member, Miles Blundell, had been "tormented by a prefiguration, almost insupportable in its clarity, of the holy City" (ATD 550-1). Even after the transfer, he senses that holiness to be present in the mundane cities that he can see. Miles is Christian and thinks in terms of doing the Stations of the Cross, but in Asia he gets this sense of approaching holiness where that holiness is geographically located, and after the transfer, he senses holiness as something that transcends the material and that can be found many places and maybe anywhere if one is open to it. Alternatively, as the Dalai Lama puts it, "*In the Buddhist tradition, the goal of pilgrimage is not so much to reach a particular destination as to awaken within oneself the qualities and energies of the sacred site, which ultimately lie within our own minds*" (Gyatso, 1-2). For characters, that openness is temporary; Oedipa Maas senses the voice that Job heard in the whirlwind when she looks from a mountain pass down over the city of San Narciso, but she loses that access to a higher power while pursuing the Tristero clues. Kit Traverse hunts Shambhala in Central Asia. In fever visions, Kit briefly sees "a city, crystalline, redemptive" (ATD 1080) on the far shore of a lake he identifies as Lake Baikal, which lake he had once seen and responded to as a holy site. Because he is not at the lake when he has this dream or vision, we sense that this realm of sacred power is accessible in more places than one, though possibly most readily accessible at particular locations on the globe. His having seen Baikal sensitizes him. Frank Traverse also sees a holy city during a wound fever and through using peyote when in Mexico. Such holiness takes various forms but is widely present; the

distractions of our lives keep us from being aware of that alternate level of reality.

In addition to the holy city, Pynchon suggests other locations for similar powers on or in the earth. I say similar because the telluric powers are not necessarily connected to any particular religion, but just represent a kind of holiness that can be attributed to Earth itself. Pynchon ventures into the earth as sentient in *Gravity's Rainbow*, where Lyle Bland discovers that gravity "is really something eerie, Messianic, extrasensory in Earth's mindbody" (*GR* 590). In *Mason & Dixon*, the Mound Builders of the Ohio Valley would seem to have been aware of this power inherent in the earth and built such telluric power into their mounds by means of layers (*M&D* 599). In that novel, Pynchon talks frequently about ley lines and the ways they can be tapped into. He even suggests that people can fly above them, though since the people involved are surveyors, this also functions as a metaphor for their learning to transfer measurements made from below to a map that gives us a view of the world as seen from a flyer's position above. Mason and Dixon's line, cut heedlessly across the natural landscape, violates such telluric patterns of power and is treated as seriously unholy.

Some cities and locations on earth seem to ooze mystic power, whether telluric or religious, but we find other kinds of human experience also revealing higher dimensions to human senses. Pynchon's primary signals for such are color and light, but any heightened sense may indicate a thinning of the veil between this world and another. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, the Kirghiz Light may blind you, but also transforms you if you are spiritually ready. Tchitcherine is most emphatically not ready, so is not reborn, but remains haunted by approaching this "holy center" (*GR* 508). *Against the Day* gives us the Tushuk Tash—the tallest natural stone arch in the world—and shortly beyond it, an explosion of both light and sound, "a great choral bellowing over the desert" and in the distance, Kit Traverse can see a city "vivid in these distances, bright yellow and orange, though soon enough it would be absorbed into the same gray confusion of exitless ravines and wind-shaped rock ascensions through which they had labored to get here" (*ATD* 770-1). Here the city, evocative of Shambhala, seems to be an illusion of light and shadow among the rocks, but Kit pursues Shambhala into the tundra. Pynchon does not explain what the noise and light may have been, but wraps them in mystery, since Kit's companion refuses to admit seeing or hearing anything, and also disappears shortly thereafter. If my understanding of the timeline is correct, Kit is seeing a distant effect of the Tunguska Event (1908), but if not, he is seeing an apparently natural phenomenon suggestive

of higher levels of creation or consciousness and accessible in this specific location.

Although these two explosions of light are unusual, Pynchon's characters often sense that light or colors are heightened, or their senses become temporarily more sensitive to the light. Kit Traverse sees “some unaccustomed light” (*ATD* 330) when meeting Scarsdale Vibe for the first time, and feels a “pure and steady light” inside himself as he realizes that he is allowing himself to be bought and that he will some day have to pay for this, “the moment his to choose, details such as how and where not as important as the equals sign going in in the right place” (*ATD* 331). In *Gravity's Rainbow*, light may accompany “the leading edge of a revelation” (*GR* 631). In *Mason & Dixon*, Rev. Wicks Cherrycoke describes a mystic experience, including “Strange Lights, Fires, Voices indecipherable” (*M&D* 10). Mason looks too hard at the light of a spark produced by an electrical eel and is appalled:

I saw at the heart of the Electrck Fire, beyond color, beyond even Shape, an Aperture into another Dispensation of Space, yea and Time, than what Astronomers and Surveyors are us'd to working with. It bade me enter, or rather it welcom'd my Spirit,—yet my Body was very shy of coming any nearer,— indeed wish'd the Vision gone. (*M&D* 433-4)

A simple natural phenomenon sucks him into a different vision of space and time. Of the various signals that another realm is near us, light, halos, rainbows, and other exercises in color are the one that remains in *Inherent Vice*. We get no direct breakthroughs, but Doc Sportello senses the possibility when he sees things edged with color, even if he cannot transcend. For him, that response to color is partly attributed to drug use rather than to an external world. Doc inclines to think that drug visions give actual access to other realities, but readers may at least doubt the substantial nature of such visions.

Yet another world that sometimes breaks through into our material world is the realm of the dead. The dead being who they are, these intrusions rely on spiritual beliefs, overlapping historical periods, or Einsteinian play with time (McClure, Smith, De Bourcier). In *Gravity's Rainbow*, séances permit communication with the assassinated politician-industrialist Walter Rathenau, among others. Vineland is heavily infiltrated by thanatoids. Some of them seem to be indeed dead and so ghosts—Ortho Bob Dulang who died in Vietnam, for instance, and probably Weed Atman. Others may just be couch potatoes welded to their TVs, and so dead in another sense. Takeshi

sets up a karmic bureau to help them arrange their karmic affairs so they can move on, presumably to rebirth. When Brock Vond is captured and carried off, he is being taken to a Yurok land of the dead, the entrance to which was in the Vineland area. Reef Traverse occasionally dreams that his dead father Webb hectors him for not following in his footsteps as a dynamiter (*ATD* 887). Webb is very much himself in those contacts, though probably headed on to rebirth, since his son Reef read aloud to his corpse for three evenings while taking it back to be buried, a practice called for in the Tibetan Book of the Dead and designed to smooth the path to rebirth (*ATD* 214). Mason's wife's ghost appears to him several times (*M&D* 164, 540, and in dreams). The dead do not as a rule cause trouble in the material world, but their reality is treated more or less as a given in many Pynchon novels (for Pynchon's ghosts and their increasing relationship to time and obligation, see Punday). Although we can always dismiss them as the credulity of various characters and they sometimes do appear in dreams, they come across as solid and "normal," particularly in *Vineland*. Readers, I think, feel expected to accept their presence rather than try to explain it away on rationalist grounds.

Pynchon is also famed for what seem like throw-away fantasy worlds, enjoyed mostly for their slapstick qualities. Slothrop throws custard pies from a balloon at Major Marvy's men, who are attacking the balloon in airplanes (*GR* 334). Japanese film monsters are treated as real for a moment in *Vineland* (*Vine* 142); a realm of giant vegetables in *Mason & Dixon* postulates a beet large enough for people to burrow into it and live inside (*M&D* 655-7); a man-sized were-beaver appears in that novel (*M&D* 619-22), as does Vaucason's now-living mechanical duck (*M&D* 372-80 and *passim*). *Gravity's Rainbow* has angels. *Against the Day* has both an airship sailing through sand and an entire city existing under the sand, with people walking its streets and in this world laws protect sentient giant sand fleas (*ATD* 440). It also has a world in which photographs take on strange powers. The picture of a corpse can be run backward in time to show the murderer, or a portrait can be run forward in time to show what the person is doing now (*ATD* 1048-9). Ball lightning proves to be able to talk (*ATD* 73-4). Many of these are just momentary wish-fulfillment worlds; Foley Walker, after nearly dying at Cold Harbor thanks to a bullet in his brain, hears voices that tell him what stocks will go up (*ATD* 101).

A final kind of world is a variation on ours, but within it, portals exist that will take people to other worlds. These portals may be quite literal. In *Against the Day*, a corner in New York City lets you transit directly to Turkey and central Asia (*ATD* 431), while ice formations in the Arctic reminiscent of Venice are a spot that would permit transiting to Venice (*ATD* 136). Not only can the

airship sail through the earth via Symmes' Hole, but Pynchon also elaborates on the hollow Earth theory in *Mason & Dixon*, when Dixon is abducted in the Arctic by dwellers of the interior. Members of their Academy of Science poke and prod him, and undermine his faith in his senses, asking whether he really wishes to bet everything on the body, given that its senses will become less trustworthy and that it will ultimately die (*M&D* 742). Dixon is returned to where he started and finds only minutes have elapsed, though he spent several days away by his subjective time. The Tushuk Tash would seem to be another such portal. The entrance to the land of the dead in *Vineland* is another. Portals are worth noting because they remain in attenuated form in *Inherent Vice*.

All of these holy cities, sources of telluric power, and portals to other realities or other parts of this world attest to Pynchon's spiritual ways of organizing experience, the mostly positive alternatives to his paranoid networks. Pynchon does offer answers to the paranoid vision that do not depend on mystical (and therefore mostly unrepeatable) experiences. One of these, which depends solely on people, is what might be called the 'commune that functions well'. Avoiding the hierarchy of organization that cannot be separated from control is virtually impossible, but Pynchon is looking for ways around this problem, and really has been ever since Tyrone Slothrop became a black marketeer, and indeed even earlier. At the bottom of Pynchon's communal efforts are two ideals: family and the slogan "keep cool, but care" (*V.* 366), a phrase that I interpret as positive, though Alan Wilde sees as negative (*Wilde* 76). *Vineland* gives us three examples of communes to think about. The People's Republic of Rock and Roll, though splashy, is not convincing as a political possibility. A college declaring its independence from the USA is not generating its own power or food, and it has nothing but enthusiastic amateurs to pit against the police. The Kunoichi Attentives, however, may grumble about their collectively produced food from an ill-run kitchen, but they have formed an apparently successful commune that does offer a good deal of support to members (*Vine* 107-11 and passim). This effective political mode of survival, if not resistance, draws considerable analysis by Samuel Thomas (138-146) and Molloy. The third possible model is the Traverse-Becker family reunion at the end, where extended family is offered as a forgiving and supportive and flexible network. *Against the Day* presents several alternatives. The Bogomil convent that homosexual spy Cyprian retires to as a nun seems willing to welcome him, and not as the basis for a smutty fabliau; he is a seeker and a convinced Christian, and his abject passivity sexually becomes an abject submission to God. Again, an earlier generation of the Traverse family than the one seen in *Vineland* represents

family as a support system that avoids control. Individually, Frank and Reef Traverse have learned a lot about doing odd jobs and making enough money to survive in many possible ways, and their girlfriends and wives have learned a bit about caring for others; together they all work out a way of living that supports them without leading to their acquiring a lot of goods or being limited to one location by property.

The airship *Inconvenience* is the third, and the most daring communal endeavor. The *Inconvenience* starts as a take off on Tom Swift-style adventure stories, but by the end of the book, the airship has grown into something so large that groundlings exhibit hysterical blindness rather than admit its size. Attached to it is a community of humans "as large as a small city. There are neighborhoods, there are parks. There are slum conditions" (ATD 1084). They carry cargo and trade goods and thus support themselves. "*Inconvenience*, once a vehicle of sky-pilgrimage, has transformed into its own destination, where any wish that can be made is at least addressed, if not always granted. . . . They will feel the turn in the wind. They will put on smoked goggles for the glory of what is coming to part the sky. They fly toward grace" (ATD 1085). We know of no saints among its crew and members, but most of them seem decent people, and for all that a ship or airship needs a captain firmly in charge (and Pynchon admittedly ignores this fact), the commercial side of their venture seems less governed from above than jointly decided upon. If control is the negative from which Pynchon flees in his paranoid visions of the world, grace is now the opposite, the hope toward which one may travel even as part of an organization. He never defines his theology exactly, but his use of Christian and even specifically Catholic terms in this one novel gives a Christian slant to its spirituality, even as we get a more Buddhist slant in *Vineland* and a Protestant slant in the colonial era scenes of *Mason & Dixon* and *Gravity's Rainbow*. Needless to say, Pynchon never limits the spiritualities to just one religion in any of his books. Rather, he prefers to open up many possibilities in hopes that one or more will prevail against the paranoid universe.

In addition to communes that work, Pynchon offers one other kind of alternative to a paranoid structure of reality: moments at which a social group, usually a nation, could choose one path or another. He identifies three such points for America, two of them predictable, and one of them a wildcard. The predictable moments are the colonial period, when slavery could have been banned but was not, and the 1960s, when the lies of the controllers were exposed and many younger folk tried to find an alternative pattern of life. The colonial period is invoked in *Gravity's Rainbow* and identified with Tyrone

Slothrop's ancestor William, whose pamphlet urged a theology that would have paid more attention to the Preterite. The pamphlet was officially burned and its author banished. By showing William Slothrop on his long trek to Boston with his pigs, Pynchon also suggests his preference for a nomadic form of existence; nomads cannot afford to accumulate goods, and doing without such goods would bring capitalism to an end. The colonial period is the entire setting for *Mason & Dixon*; their eponymous line will divide slave from free states, and they themselves are appalled at what they see of slavery, having also seen it in South Africa. The 1960s as moment of possibility figures in *Vineland* and in *Inherent Vice*.

The wildcard moment appears only in *Inherent Vice*: Pynchon plays with the myth of Lemuria and of Lemurians fleeing the destruction of their continent, landing in California, and peopling it. Like the equally mythical Atlantis, Lemuria in the Pacific was supposedly utopian, so they should have been able to make California similarly ideal, but somehow they failed. I will discuss what *Inherent Vice* does with these tropes later, but for now I simply note that Pynchon mounts a surprising number of alternatives to the negative paranoid vision. In particular, they blossom in *Against the Day*. If Pynchon's novels up through *Gravity's Rainbow* are heavily paranoid, we get more balance between negative and positive in the middle novels, and with *Against the Day* and *Inherent Vice*, the positive ways of interpreting reality seem the stronger, though they by no means cancel out horrors. For some readers, horrors outweigh any hopes. Liesl Schillinger saw the Chums of Chance escapism in *Against the Day* as the only way offered to deal with the grim reality: "It doesn't make much sense,' one of his characters observes, 'this pretending to carry on with the day.' What remains, his new books suggests, is to *write* as if it were not so, to 'construct a self-consistent world to live inside'" (26). Let me turn now to *Inherent Vice* in particular, and see what kind of world Pynchon is creating in this most recent novel.

Attenuated Realities in *Inherent Vice*

Since paranoia was so important in Pynchon's earlier novels for establishing his kind of world-creation, we might start with the way this is handled in *Inherent Vice*. Normally, paranoia reflects a desperate attempt to find meaning by linking events in an ominous manner. Meaningful linkage, even if frightening, is preferable to anti-paranoia (GR 434) or no connections or meaning at all. Paranoia also overlaps a cynical habit of mind: the LAPD has a reputation for corruption, so any negative linkage to that institution is assumed by all but the culpably innocent. *Inherent Vice* alters both kinds of

paranoia. Doc Sportello has what seem like paranoid fits when he considers all possible permutations of dangerous linkages. However, as a private investigator, that mental exercise is an important tool of his trade, as he admits (*IV* 117). We see him systematically considering alternative, wild-seeming interpretations (*IV* 217, 221, 248, 273-4, 293, 303) and see that what could be mental illness is, in his case, a necessary part of his work. In this regard, Pynchon is almost doing what Jonathan Lethem does to make Tourette's syndrome a tool for his detective in *Motherless Brooklyn*.

For all that he exercises this habit of mind very freely, Doc Sportello strikes his cynical acquaintances as not paranoid enough. As one friend puts it, "This is Dr. Reality's office calling, you're way overdue for your checkup" (*IV* 53). "Jeez, Doc, at this rate they're going to pull your paranoia card. Even a PI can't be that naïve" (*IV* 122). When he hesitates to assume that the LAPD is involved, he is asked "What are you a doctor of, tripping? University of what planet again?" (*IV* 151). In other words, by the standards of those who survive in the illegal and semi-legal worlds, he seems very far from clinically disturbed; indeed, he is not worried enough. Pynchon thus makes the paranoia both functional and mild by local standards, even contemptibly so. The paranoias visible in *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Vineland* seem a lot closer to clinical conditions than does Doc's outlook.

Paranoia involves the mind joining two apparently separate things and positing a threatening connection. Doc is credited with this sort of hypersensitivity, but the stated reason for his tendency is his drug use and the connections sensed are not sinister. Actually, Pynchon is not consistent on Doc's drug habits. Doc is a heavy user of pot and is always lighting up, but he refers to his first acid trip at the hands of Vehi Fairfield as if it were his first and only. He does a second in the course of the novel. His hypersensitivities, however, are mostly attributed to acid use. He senses a consummated affair between two people; "if acid-tripping was good for anything, it helped tune you to different unlisted frequencies" (*IV* 61). "A private eye didn't drop acid for years in this town without picking up some kind of extrasensory chops, and truth was, since crossing the doorsill of this place, Doc couldn't help noticing what you'd call an atmosphere" (*IV* 129). To his friend who feels that surfing the ARPAnet is like an acid trip, Doc remarks, "Remember how they outlawed acid soon as they found out it was a channel to somethin they didn't want us to see?" (*IV* 195).

Marijuana too, is credited with sharpening sensitivity. "It could've been some unexpected side effect from all the dope he'd been smoking, but Doc now felt an ice-cold electric shock blasting through the room" (*IV* 266). Doc

speaks of his “Doper’s Intuition” (IV 359) when he asks whether Sauncho had taken out a policy on the ship *Preserved*. Doc is thus considered more than normally sensitive to currents among humans, but not to a truly extrasensory level. He is not reading minds. Indeed, Pynchon seems to make fun of Doc’s sensitivity. Four times (IV 202, 212, 217, 273) when Doc starts to see a connection, his nose itches madly or runs. His sensitivity is treated as if it were an allergy rather than an insight given him from on high.

In earlier novels, strange lighting effects signaled the nearness of an alternate reality, the thinning of barriers between worlds. Light remains very important in *Inherent Vice*, but luminosity leads to nothing tangible, and is often just a sunset or the unusual result of combining light and inshore fog. The first mystic-seeming light attaches to a velvet painting Doc has: “Sometimes in the shadows the view would light up, usually when he was smoking weed, as if the contrast knob of Creation had been messed with just enough to give everything an underglow, a luminous edge, and promise that the night was about to turn epic somehow” (IV 6). All that it heralds is the investigation that will occupy this novel, and he emerges at the end untransformed and no better off than he was at the outset. Fog causes him to see “a million separate little haloes radiating all colors of the spectrum” (IV 86), but the colored lights come from a night club marquee, and all that this light heralds is a contact on whom he will have to exercise a light touch. Surfing produces “seething tunnels of solar bluegreen, the true and unendurable color of daylight” (IV 100), but the various giant waves do not lead anyone into a new state of being, though there may be a connection between these waves and fabled Lemuria. When Glen Charlock gets shot down, “The light wasn’t protecting him, not the way it will sometimes protect the actors in a movie, the way moviegoers have gotten used to. This wasn’t studio light, only the indiscriminate L. A. sun, but somehow it was singling out Glen, setting him apart as the one who would not be spared” (IV 142). Sunset shows Doc “light over all deep L.A. softening to purple with some darker gold to it” (IV 182), but this just proves to be a glorious sunset. That sunset is “all” that we are seeing, but maybe that is now enough; it need not lead to another realm of existence. We need, instead, to focus on the one we have.

The closest *Inherent Vice* comes to transcending ordinary realities seems insubstantial by comparison to previous adventures in earlier novels, such as Dixon’s abduction by inhabitants of the Hollow Earth or the world of giant vegetables. One is the glimpse of structures related to Lemuria and seeing an ex-girlfriend on a boat, but they are seen in an LSD vision, so do not violate consensus reality the way visiting Lemuria through a portal or time-

travel would. Another is Coy Harlingen's apparent ability to disappear; you're looking at him one moment, but the next he is not there. This occurs on pages 131, 193, is referred to twice on 298 (once as his Invisible Man number), and happens again on 311. Einar's disappearance on 231 is similar but more obviously motivated. What this adds up to is that Coy specializes in quick fades. He does not appear simultaneously 200 miles away. He does not escape disaster. This simply characterizes him and his uneasy relationship with people for whom he is supposedly dead. In other words, Pynchon is not violating any rules of normal reality, and if any violation is involved at all, it serves no greater purpose than to create a bit of strangeness.

Arrepentimiento, Mickey Wolfmann's cluster of zones in the desert, provides another such remnant of alternative reality. This settlement was built to provide free housing for anyone who wanted it. After Wolfmann has been psychologically reconditioned to prevent him giving away his fortune, he pulls his money from the desert project, and its planner, Riggs, stays on there alone. Riggs claims that zones "can act as doorways to other dimensions. . . . All I have to do is step through that door over there, and I'm safe" (*IV* 253). Doc wants to look through the door, but is warned not to, and instead of risking it, he meekly obeys and leaves. Hence, we have nothing but Riggs's word that the door is a portal, and Riggs seems unstable and paranoid at this point. Had Doc looked through the door, Pynchon could have solidified the reality of this portal as far as the fictional world goes, but Doc does not look. How different is the alternate Chicago in *Against the Day*, also a realm devoted to repentance. Lew Basnight wanders among hotels with strange walkways and elevators that do not move vertically. He tries to find out what his crime is for which he is to do penance, but cannot get that explained, except perhaps as something he did in a previous life. We see the strangeness of this world through his eyes, and the matter-of-fact descriptions help make the world seem solid, if troubling. Riggs has neither the credibility nor the down-to-earth tone that persuades us to treat the story as a fictionally solid reality.

One way that Pynchon at least momentarily shakes our sense of reality is his way of pairing Doc Sportello as a double to three other characters. Shasta points out to him the parallels between his own modus operandi and that of Coy Harlingen (*IV* 313-4), and she rather shakes Doc, who had not seen the similarities. Puck Beaverton tells him that he is like Glen Charlock (*IV* 320); Glen refused to hide when warned of an attack because his job with Mickey is his first real job, and he feels he owes loyalty to his employer. Doc shows loyalty to many friends, and takes on dangerous jobs because he

won't give in and run. The strongest pairing links him to Bigfoot Bjornsen; one is a policeman and one a private investigator, but despite their hostilities, they are working on the same cases and very occasionally share information, though Doc is more generous with information than Bjornsen is. Twice, Doc surprises in himself a faint impulse to do the sarcastic and hostile Bjornsen a favor, if only to offer sympathy; even more surprising, he holds back both times. He denies being Bjornsen's keeper, denies their brotherhood (*IV* 350). Given Pynchon's respect in all his books for people who care about and for others, this raises questions. Possibly the hostile difference in values between them is too great for Bigfoot to accept such an obligation. Bigfoot does, however, honor one obligation; he does not arrest Doc for killing Adrian Prussia and Puck Beaverton, since Doc's acts get Bigfoot his revenge for the murder of his professional partner.

If we can no longer think in terms of alternate realities in *Inherent Vice*, what kind of life does Pynchon recommend? First, what we might expect. Shasta admits that "it was luck, dumb luck, that had put them each where they were, and the best way to pay for any luck, however temporary, was just to be helpful when you could" (*IV* 312). So, be helpful when you can. Petunia is good at matchmaking and is studying for a degree in Relationship Counseling. She wants to "make some contribution no matter how tiny to the total amount of love in the world" (*IV* 288). Second: have children. Petunia announces her pregnancy at the end of the novel, and Doc shows himself genuinely moved and enthusiastic about her bringing a new life into the world. Adding to love and starting a family: those seem reasonable in Pynchon's current vision. If putting help into the system and fostering love—especially through family—are the positives, the reverse of that is to avoid building up ill will through selfish actions. He tells off the offensive, wealthy representative of the Golden Fang, Crocker Fenway, whom he identifies with landlords (as opposed to tenants): "every time one of you gets greedy like that, the bad-karma level gets jacked up one more little two-hundred-dollar notch. After a while that starts to add up. For years now under everybody's nose there's been all this class hatred, slowly building" (*IV* 347). Doc suggests that some day the gated communities will be under siege, and we think back to the siege of Foppl's in *V.*, the heavily armed community hiding out from African insurrection, and the distant slaughter that members of that siege party avidly watched. Crocker Fenway would have been right at home at Foppl's.

These are very modest recommendations for how to live in the world. Pynchon does not even hold out repentance, personal or general, as the model in this book; after all, Mickey Wolfmann tried that, and was locked up

in an expensive funny farm and 'treated' to prevent him giving his fortune away. Wolfmann is less lucky than Ruperta Chirpingdon-Groin of *Against the Day*, who can recognize her need to repent and can carry it out without hindrance. Pynchon's hindsight lets him view the period of *Inherent Vice* from two perspectives, from that of the characters and from that of 2009. Doc senses that "the Psychedelic Sixties, this little parenthesis of light, might close after all, and all be lost, taken back into darkness . . . how a certain hand might reach terribly out of darkness and reclaim the time, easy as taking a joint from a dooper and stubbing it out for good" (IV 254-5). The certain hand belongs to Ronald Reagan, the *bête noire* of *Vineland*; to protect Reagan politically, *Inherent Vice's* Adrian Prussia starts his career as a hit man (IV 321). *Vineland* may offer as negative a view of America as *Inherent Vice* (Schaub, 35), but Pynchon had not entirely lost his sense of alternative realities in that book. *Inherent Vice* gives him no place else to turn. His eschewing alternative realities is one reason that this book does not become a postmodernized detective story, and the emphasis on the historical present makes it at least as much a historical novel.

Pynchon's assessment of America gets tied to the utopian shadow of Lemuria in this novel. In the closing pages, Sauncho sums the situation up as he and Doc watch the schooner *Preserved* (formerly *The Golden Fang*):

the years of promise, gone and unrecoverable, of the land almost allowed to claim its better destiny, only to have the claim jumped by evildoers known all too well, and taken instead and held hostage to the future we must live in now forever. May we trust that this blessed ship is bound for some better shore, some undrowned Lemuria, risen and redeemed, where the American fate, mercifully, failed to transpire. (IV 341)

Pynchon does not offer much hope for our future, so the most we can do is little helpful acts at the personal level. Whether readers take those as hopeful and warming, or whether they find them futile and too disappointing to take seriously rests ultimately on the readers' own sensibilities. Since the world seems better for them than without, I take them to be positive, but obviously limited. His ARPAnet friends only predict what Pynchon knows to have come to pass: "someday everybody's gonna wake up and find they're under surveillance they can't escape" (IV 365)—or, as *Gravity's Rainbow* put it, "Once the technical means of control have reached a certain size, a certain degree of *being connected* one to another, the chances for freedom are over for good" (GR 539). The small acts, in this and his other books, may make

moments of life better, but they will not deflect the trajectory of technological enslavement or possible apocalypse.

So, is Pynchon growing up? Growing old? Or accepting the universe? To say he is growing up or old merely express reader approval or disapproval that rests on reader political outlook. He reminds us of religious answers far less frequently or thoroughly than in *Against the Day*. Lemuria has none of the substance of Dixon's Hollow Earth inhabitants or even *Against the Day's* city below the sand. Philosophically, though, what *Inherent Vice* does is explore Pynchon's nightmare and worst case scenario, namely that this is all we have. This is a nightmare in a very specific sense. Almost all of his earlier books are at least as pessimistic about human behavior and experience, though *The Crying of Lot 49* seems mildly hopeful that change is possible and *Vineland* and *Against the Day* put considerable trust in family. In general, though, Pynchon focuses on places and times in which Western civilization and more specifically America have taken the wrong turning, and the results are not reversible. His fictional worlds are not cheerful, but in the earlier novels, parallel realities offer insights and experiences that render the gloomy reality less stable and threatening. Religious dimensions even imply the possibility of heaven or afterlife or rebirth, any of which reduce the importance of the state of the world. If nothing exists beyond material reality, however, then how should we conduct our lives?

This seems to be his main question in *Inherent Vice*. He suggests that acid and pot are helpful, if only because they sharpen sensitivity to what is, and may suggest different patterns of feeling or behavior to follow. I think he wishes the visions could be taken seriously as alternative realities, but they seem to remain dopers' dreams in this novel. He makes a faint allusion to the potential of communes: in the final freeway fog, he imagines drivers forming a "temporary commune" (IV 368) by means of their phones and car computers of the future in order to help each other home. Home is his bedrock, his touchstone, home with its links to family. Doc does not forget his longing for other possibilities. His final wish is that the fog would "burn away, and for something else this time, somehow, to be there instead" (IV 369). Pynchon evidently would like that, another world, another chance, but he seems in this book to focus on what we can do if nothing else is there, just the world that is all that is the case.

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