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Paper given at the Contemporary Fiction Research Seminar in 2012.0009

Martin Paul Eve

## SLIDE

As we draw to the close of 2012, it's worth noting that 2013 marks some significant moments for the panel today. It will be 50 years since a 26-year old Pynchon published *V.*, forty years since the publication of his epic masterwork, *Gravity's Rainbow*, as well as the occasion for the International Pynchon Week conference in Durham and we've also seen, with a slightly self-serving plug at the start here, the launch of a new journal of Pynchon scholarship, which I edit with Doug, *Orbit*, which you can view at [www.pynchon.net](http://www.pynchon.net).

At this moment, for “Pynchon now”, there are some points that I think it is vital that we address. Since the publication of Thomas Pynchon's third novel, *Gravity's Rainbow*, in 1973, it has been clear to most that his works have engaged with specific ethico-political ideologies. That Pynchon is “a step leftward of registering to vote as a Democrat”, as one character puts it in *Vineland* seems clear. Where exactly within his texts, especially the earlier works, this sentiment comes from is, however, a very different matter. Furthermore, if we're not willing to drill down and find these moments, we need to be careful for, as Adorno has cautioned us, in his Hegelian riff: the Whole is merely the false. To kick off our “Pynchon Now” session, I want to take a touring career-wide sweep of Pynchon's ethics and politics, but I also want to begin to ask questions about a practice that I see in his work, and other overloaded forms such as the more recent Roberto Bolaño's *2666*, that I've called “crypto-didacticism”. How do Pynchon's novels get us onside for their ethics; what are their didactic, moralising techniques and practices (for surely, when we say ethics, what we usually mean are the morals we like, as opposed to a discourse on the nature of moral thinking); and how might this relate to Pynchon's aesthetics? It's also worth saying at the outset here that I'm going

to try to strike a balance between addressing an assumed audience consisting of paid-up Pynchon fanatics and those with a mixed-degree of Pynchon-immersion. In short: I'll try to avoid patronising either of those potential groups, but as an introductory paper to the panel, you'll have to be a little forgiving, in both camps.

## **SLIDE**

To begin with some taxonomical observations, Pynchon's works fall, broadly speaking, into two distinct categories: the California cycle of *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Vineland* and *Inherent Vice* can be contrasted with the epic historical or historiographic works, *V.*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Mason & Dixon* and *Against the Day*. Pynchon has also written three essay pieces: "Is it OK to be a Luddite?", "Nearer my Couch to Thee" and "Into the Mind of Watts" (there are further paratexts of note to the field, which consist mostly of introductions to works such as *1984*, CD liner notes and Pynchon's personal editorial correspondence). This primary taxonomy of Californian vs. epic novels is important for thinking about Pynchon's ethics because it puts two specific historical moments under the spotlight: 1.) the failure of the Leftist project in the 1960s and 2.) the enduring repercussions felt under the Reagan administration and aggressive neoliberal modes since the 1980s. The California cycle novels are set distinctly in these frames, while the epics bring us a history of the present which, to my eyes, and also to David Cowart's, look distinctly like Foucauldian genealogies: critical histories of the Rocket and NASA in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the Enlightenment in *Mason & Dixon* and twenty-first-century capitalism in *Against the Day* (OK, you might dispute that *Against the Day* is focused on this aspect, but then a text with over 700 characters is bound to bring some level of diversity).

Let me deal first, albeit in the reductive form to which this type of survey paper must surrender itself, with Pynchon's epic cycle. **SLIDE** Ethical approaches to Pynchon's earliest novel, *V.*, have

been twofold in form, that I believe can be said to contribute to a normative ethics and a meta-ethics. The normative ethical proclamations in *V.* seem to be concerned with Nazism and are most prominently brought to the fore through the novel's focus upon the Herero genocide, an otherwise broadly unremarked-upon episode in early twentieth-century history. During Foppl's siege party, a crucial episode in that first text, Pynchon writes of an association with Nazism that is hard to shake. Indeed, the sinister Weissman, who will later re-appear in *Gravity's Rainbow*, manifests his tendencies towards extreme, right-wing politics through his interrogation of Mondaugen's knowledge of "D'Annunzio", "Mussolini", "Fascisti" and the "National Socialist German Workers' Party". Finally, he is disappointed: **SLIDE** "[f]rom Munich and never heard of Hitler,' said Weissmann, as if 'Hitler' were the name of an avant-garde play". Perhaps the most notorious line for ethical thinking in *V.*, however, is the infamous statement of the narrator on the number of murders committed in the Herero genocide that **SLIDE** "[t]his is only 1 per cent of six million, but still pretty good", which obviously brings in problematic notions of Holocaust absolutism against relativity and a whole series of debates with Eli Wiesel's stance that have yet to be fully played out in the field. This relativising strain spills over into the meta-ethical stance in *V.*, which can now be properly historicized as a product of its time: there is a clear focus on narratives of alterity. From our perspective, as Shawn Smith puts it, it is "no longer new or revolutionary" to state that "history is a field of competing rhetorical or narrative strategies". Pynchon, in 1963, however, seems to take exactly that stance.

## **SLIDE**

*Gravity's Rainbow*, the next of Pynchon's epics and still his most celebrated work, takes a different tack. The most prominent theme in this novel seems to be the genesis of contemporary America's technological and economic supremacy in the slave labour camps that built the V2. Although *Gravity's Rainbow* forks and branches and scorns the heresy of reductive interpretation as

privileging some nebulous platonic “Real Text” (with capitalised casing), the primacy placed on the epigraph attributed to Wernher von Braun, the head of NASA who also worked on the V2 programme in World War II, seems also to privilege this particular historical strand. Alongside this, of course, lies an abundance of other areas to explore, but the strand that takes the silver medal in *Gravity's Rainbow*, for me, is the surfacing of Pynchon's enduring interest in ecology, particularly in the scene where Slothrop receives Luddite suggestions from a pine tree, suggesting he sabotage the local farm equipment. Pynchon's techniques for staging the genealogy of the Rocket, as we might call it, though, are interesting. Less blunt than *V.*, Pynchon moves the Holocaust to the periphery of his novel. We never receive the metonymic “Auschwitz”, but instead are given “camp Dora”. Approach and avoid is the highlighting technique. It seems also that Pynchon has, by this stage, begun to consider the advice of Corlies Smith, his friend and editor. Smith told Pynchon, in their editorial correspondence for *V.*, **SLIDE** that he thought Pynchon should avoid trying to write a protest novel. It seems to me that, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon attempts to write a cloaked protest novel that buries its target amid its overloaded, encyclopaedic form.

After a long break of 20 years, Pynchon's readers were confronted with *Vineland*, Pynchon's most disparaged novel, to which I'll return shortly. **SLIDE** What they were expecting, however, was *Mason & Dixon* which was instead released in 1997. Another of Pynchon's epics, this novel charts the surveying escapades of the eponymous protagonists, with great potential for the ironic historiographic metafiction for which Pynchon is famed, in relation to the American Civil War. Full of metafictional play, including a narrative that metaleptically folds across its enclosed diegetic layers, the normative ethics in this novel seem, straightforwardly, to centre on slavery, its link to Enlightenment and capitalism. Dixon, in Pynchon's version, snatches a whip from a slave driver in a central episode. The future-orientated twist that Pynchon introduces is to tie this to a critique of instrumental rationality and twentieth-century contexts, tying in precarity and indentured wage

labour: “slavery leading the charge to Enlightenment” as Brian Thill puts it – while Pynchon puts it another: “Commerce without Slavery is unthinkable”, a slavery which depends upon the “gallows”. *Mason & Dixon* is also a highly interesting text on the aesthetic level, not only for its playful narrative interweaving, but also for its use of 18th-century grammatical and typographical conventions, adding an extra layer of reader involvement in the process.

The final of Pynchon's epics, so far, is **SLIDE** *Against the Day*, his 2006 genre-bending behemoth that charts the period between the 1893 Chicago World's Fair to just before World War II with a cast comprised of airships, anarchists and shamans. Although this work is extreme, even by standards of the encyclopaedic novel, there seems to be a particular focus given, as is the case across many of Pynchon's works, to anarchism. At a basic level, *Against the Day* makes direct reference to a large number of prominent historical anarchists; Benjamin Tucker, Leon Czolgosz, Mikhail Bakunin, Peter Kropotkin, Jean-Baptiste Sipido, Gaetano Bresci and Luigi Lucheni among others.

Anarchism, in Pynchon's text, is presented as a dualism; on the positive side, the product of an liberating socialism, but also, in its terroristic capacity, an affirmation of Reaganomics, the outcome of devolved autonomy – the well-known libertarian problem of freedom to, vs. freedom from. Of course, it's Pynchon, so we get a double-edged presentation. On the one hand, there seems to be a critique of anarchism via the idea of a narrowed temporal bandwidth that Pynchon had earlier used in *Gravity's Rainbow* when he writes: “[t]hese people [...] they're all so unanchored, no history, no responsibility, one day they just appear, don't they, each with his own secret designs”. Conversely, though, Lew Basnight finds himself unable to reconcile the “bearded, wild-eyed, bomb-Rolling” description furnished by his agency with the people he meets in the company of Moss Gatlin, the travelling anarchist preacher. The injustice of the social stereotype is finally driven home when Pynchon writes of the betrayal felt on account of the mainstream representation: “[t]he Anarchists and Socialists on the shift had their own mixed feelings about history”.

Each of the historic contexts of the epics seems to contribute to the backdrop and climate of Pynchon's California cycle of novels. **SLIDE** In *The Crying of Lot 49*, which Pynchon referred to as “a piece of shit” in his correspondence, anarchism resurfaces when the anti-detective protagonist, Oedipa Maas, encounters a deaf-mute dance from which she asks: “how long could it go on before collisions became a severe hindrance? [...] But none came.” This utopian vision of a libertarian community, as Thomas Schaub frames it, distinctly tends towards the “no-place” of utopia's homophones though. Indeed, the context in which this is framed is one of incoherence: Oedipa is a Young Republican who plays fast and loose with supposed Republican moral values; we're shown a Confederate organisation, the Peter Pinguid Society, that celebrates a day of historic value for the Union and shuns capitalism because, in a historical materialistic sense, it leads to Marxism; Pynchon gives us a “facially deformed welder, who cherished his ugliness”; a live child who longs for his own pre-natal abortion; a black woman who goes through “rituals of miscarriage” and a voyeur who does not know the object of his voyeurism. The list goes on and the utopia ironically framed by the closing line of *Against the Day* is broken down: “they fly towards Grace”.

**SLIDE** *Vineland* takes this further and gives a more direct commentary upon the 80s, Reagan and mass-confinement military exercises such as the sinister REX-84. Although not well-received critically at its moment of release (if you've read the new David Foster Wallace biography, you'll note that DT Max claims that this was the work that singularly turned Wallace off Pynchon), there has been subsequent interest in this novel. To my mind, the most interesting aspect of *Vineland*, for an ethical stance, is its resonance with the sentiment in *Gravity's Rainbow* that humans have an essentialist will towards complicity with their own domination. In *Gravity's Rainbow* it is remarked that The Counterforce are “schizoid, as double-minded in the massive presence of money, as any of the rest of us” and that “[a]s long as they allow us a glimpse [of the promised temptation], however rarely. We need that”. *Vineland* is problematic in this respect, though. Instead of the universal figuration that was provided in the earlier epic, in this novel Pynchon links female hetero-sexual

desire to a will to submission. Frenesi, who feels an attraction to Brock Vond, the Reaganite, bent police officer, is described as though “some Cosmic Fascist had spliced in a DNA sequence requiring this form of seduction”. Although this seems to echo Foucault's question in his 1975 interview “Sade, Sergeant of Sex”: “[w]hy these boots, caps, and eagles that are found to be so infatuating, particularly in the United States?”, the way the link is made predominantly with regard to female sexuality and essentialism is troubling in this novel.

**SLIDE** The last of Pynchon's California novels is *Inherent Vice*, a faux-Noir detective work with a hippy investigator, Doc Sportello, self-employed under LSD Investigations: that's Location, Surveillance, Detection, in case you were wondering. Another slight volume, this is easily Pynchon's most filmable work and, for those who don't know, PT Anderson is down to direct a version starring Robert Downey Jnr as Doc. There are two ethical points that I want to draw out from this text. Firstly, Pynchon demolishes the naïve nostalgic view of the 60s through a demonstration that even Hippy culture sits atop a history of racial oppression – as Doug points out in a forthcoming article. Secondly, though, the presentation of the internet in *Inherent Vice* is given the same Luddite treatment that was prevalent in *Mason & Dixon's* critique of Enlightenment instrumental rationality. Pynchon achieves this through positing that the ARPAnet system used by Fritz in the novel has “some connection with TRW”, which stands for Thompson Ramo Wooldridge company. It turns out that TRW was peripherally connected to the development of ARPAnet, the predecessor of the internet, but was also founded by the fathers of the ICBM. In, again, tracing back a genealogy of contemporary technology to the rocket, Pynchon's research track runs deep; the connection between TRW and ARPAnet is not obvious. Indeed, perhaps the best mirror of this oblique reference is the shared name and initial between Pynchon's Glen Charlock and Glen Culler, the TRW employee whose node was among the first four connected to the new packet-switching network and the man responsible for the second draft of the Interface Message Processor. Although the point is cryptically made, the implications are well phrased by Janet Abbate **SLIDE**: “[i]n the



years since the Internet was transferred to civilian control, its military roots have been downplayed [... but] [t]he Internet was not built in response to popular demand [...] Rather, the project reflected the command economy of military procurement". Pynchon is correct, therefore, in positing this connection as the network's construction on behalf of ARPA did place impositions upon academic work, even if these came ex post facto, for as Leonard Kleinrock puts it: "[e]very time I wrote a proposal I had to show the relevance to the military's applications". Furthermore, several of ARPA's key figures from 1965 onwards, such as Robert Taylor, were former NASA employees, the genealogy of that organisation having been thoroughly asserted by Pynchon in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

From this broad sweep (which could invite a punning reference to the Brumal night in *Mason & Dixon: Tis a brumal night*, for behold it *sweepeth*) we can crudely formulate a list of Pynchon's predominant concerns that could be called "ethical". We can also start to build a linear chronology of this development:

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- 1.) The genesis of instrumental rationality in the Enlightenment
- 2.) The interlinking of slavery with a rational capitalism, in which Pynchon retains a Puritan inflection, and which leads to ecological destruction
- 3.) The Frankfurt-School-esque terminus of this mode of rationality in the death and labor camps
- 4.) the interlinking of such genocide with specifically right-wing politics and economic practices
- 5.) the predication of contemporary America's technological and economic supremacy upon histories of such politics and practices

**SLIDE** In addition to these precepts, which could have been deduced by just sitting down and reading a lot of Marcuse and Adorno, it also seems fairly clear that agency in Pynchon's texts is

constrained by a form of social subjectification. Although others have contested a Foucauldian parallel on the grounds of differing power models, I think there's a good case to be made to see alignment between Pynchon and late-Foucault (say, in the College de France lecture series published under the title *The Hermeneutics of the Self*) here because it marks a continual tension between a self that can act upon others and itself (consider GR's "we do know what's going on and we let it go on") and a self that is wholly constructed by forces beyond the power and knowledge of the actor ("the cosmic fascist in our DNA"). As Judith Butler puts it in *Giving an Account of Oneself*: "[t]his ethical agency is neither fully determined nor radically free".

This brings me, after this survey, back to thinking about Pynchon's didacticism and morality, as opposed to that we call ethics in literature. Derek Attridge proposes that the study of literary ethics must remain sensitive to "to the work's distinct utterance", or to rephrase, that it should avoid Adorno's criticism of applied philosophy which only reads out of works airs of its own concretion. It seems to me, however, that an ethical consideration of literature must consider not only the normative doctrines that are communicated, with all the dangers of literary instrumentalism and confirmation bias that must carry, but the formal and aesthetic means by which such doctrines are conveyed and the way in which they are interlinked. Let me conclude by giving two instances of such querying, one from a California cycle novel, and one broader question from the epics.

**SLIDE** The following passage comes from the opening to *Lot 49*:

She tried to think back to whether anything unusual had happened around then. Through the rest of the afternoon, through her trip to the market in downtown Kinneret-Among-The-Pines to buy ricotta and listen to the Muzak (today she came through the bead-curtained entrance around bar 4 of the Fort Wayne Settecento Ensemble's variorum recording of the Vivaldi Kazoo Concerto, Boyd Beaver, soloist); then through the sunned gathering of her marjoram and sweet basil from the herb garden, reading of book reviews in the latest *Scientific American*, into the layering of a lasagna, garlicking of a bread, tearing up of romaine leaves, eventually, oven on, into the mixing of the twilight's whiskey sours against the arrival of her husband, Wendell ("Mucho") Maas from work, she wondered,

wondered, shuffling back through a fat deckful of days which seemed (wouldn't she be first to admit it?) more or less identical, or all pointing the same way subtly like a conjurer's deck, any odd one readily clear to a trained eye

This passage serves as an excellent *mise-en-abîme* for much of Pynchon's fiction, featuring, as it does: classical music played on the Kazoo, digressive asides, characters who accrue only a single mention before disappearing and a syntax that is difficult to parse. Interspersed in this passage are no fewer than three instances of “through”, two appearances of “into” before a turnaround: “back”.

This “through [...] through [...] then through [...] into [...] into [...] against [...] back through” sequence gives a rationale for the sentence's difficulty. The first five prepositions carry connotations of forward movement, rapidity, involvement and progress. As with much of Oedipa's investigative unravelling, it falsely appears that she might be getting somewhere; she “knows a few things” (75). With each additional “through” and “into”, the pace of the sentence gathers. Despite the stalling “against” moment before, which introduces the first hint of oppositional tension, it comes as a surprise when the central active verb within this extract (“wondered”) reverses the flow of the sentence by omitting the anticipated conjunction (“whether” or “if”) that would begin an interrogative content clause. Instead, Pynchon forces a back reference to the antecedent sentence: “[s]he tried to think back to whether anything unusual had happened around then”. The final temporal locative adverb in this sentence refers back further to “a year ago”, which must be construed relatively from the book's very first, nondescript, clause: “[o]ne summer afternoon” (5). There is no subsequent forward motion in this extract, only a reversal, a “shuffling back through” the card deck of days, searching for the oddity. Indeed, this reversal continues throughout the entire novel, which contains, despite the initial pages bulging with forward throughness, a grand total of 75 occurrences of the word “through” compared to 131 instances of “back”; an average for the latter of over one use per page in the edition here cited. The problems of stasis and entropy that gather and impede the protagonist throughout seem to be concerned with notions of nostalgia, of backward motion, which of course links to Pynchon's politico-moral stance.

Finally, though I want to close with a question or two pertaining to Pynchon's big novels that I am beginning to work through – and these are questions that I can only leave unanswered today: what specific didactic techniques inhere within the aesthetic of an encyclopaedic work? Is there, potentially, a technique here through which Pynchon enlists our support through our own, complicit investment of intellectual capital into decoding and understanding his works? Pynchon's works are ideological worlds, full of false representation and it seems unfair to have spent such effort decoding them if not to critically question the subjects that Pynchon attempts to interpellate through his hailing devices: “ha, reader! Caught you with your pants down!” It would have taken more time than was available here to answer such questions, so you got this survey instead, but it now seems necessary to think through such questions, so as to not be the audience, doomed unknowingly to obliteration in a movie theatre, nonetheless singing Pynchon's tune, merely following the bouncing ball: **SLIDE**

“Now everybody–“