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AN OLD FAITH IN THE WESTWARD VECTOR: THE FRONTIER IN THE WORKS OF THOMAS PYNCHON

At the end of Thomas Pynchon's 2006 novel *Against the Day*, the majority of the novel's principal characters can be found headed West propelled by what the narrator describes as an "old faith in the westward vector in finding someplace, some deep penultimate town the capitalist/Christer gridwork hadn't got to quite yet" (2006, 1075). This image of gridwork harkens back to Pynchon's most widely read novel *The Crying of Lot 49*, published in 1965. At one point this novel's protagonist, Oedipa Maas, looks down on a California subdivision of homes only to be reminded of the printed circuit of a transistor radio. As the narrator notes "there were to both outward patterns, a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning of an intent to communicate" (Pynchon 1999, 14). We are further told that "a revelation [...] trembled just past the threshold of her understanding." As Oedipa's journey in the book continues she uncovers what she believes to be a conspiracy of a mysterious group called Trystero. As she investigates, she comes to understand the capitalist gridwork that permeates society and creates classes of haves and have-nots who make up Trystero – or to borrow a phrase from another of Pynchon's works, the elect, those seemingly with God's blessings, and the preterite, those passed over by God's grace. The true shock to Oedipa is that this gridwork was unknown to her prior to her journey – as the narrator puts it there were "a hundred alienations, if only she had looked" (148).

Though written and published forty years apart, *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Against the Day* display an ongoing motif in Pynchon's novels: a deep ambivalence toward and often outright rejection of the social and economic norms that exist within the crushing gridwork of industrial capitalism and the use of symbolic frontiers to suggest a means of escaping that gridwork. My reading of the frontier in these novels calls upon Graham Benton's work on anarchism in Pynchon's 1973 novel *Gravity's Rainbow*. To Benton, "logic which demands a rigorous interrogation of the limits of freedom across discursive fields requires a cognitive stance that envisions the possibility for new frontiers of freedom to open in spaces not expressly co-opted by the state apparatus" (1998, 155). To explore the 'limits of freedom' in Pynchon's work hinges on a turn to literal or symbolic frontiers that evoke images and concepts associated with the American frontier or American expansion Westward. This pattern is most conspicuous in *Against the Day*, which uses the American west as its primary setting and indeed calls into question the nature of the American frontier itself by beginning in the 1893 Chicago World's Fair and referencing Fredrick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis that posits the close end of the frontier before sending the novel's characters off into a raucous west anyway. This motion westward and concern with the frontier is also apparent in the 1997 novel *Mason & Dixon* with its ruminations on drawing borders that stretch westward, in this case the eponymous Mason Dixon line. Pynchon's other works evoke the symbolism of the frontier in more subtle fashion. In the California novels – *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Vineland* (1989), and *Inherent Vice* (2009) – Pynchon focuses on California as a symbol of the terminal point of the American West and the home of America's cultural machine, Hollywood. This cultural powerhouse poised at the edge of the country reinscribes the mythos of the frontier and its figures – the cowboy and his close cousin the detective – in countless iterations. The two novels currently endcapping Pynchon's career, *V.* (1961), and *Bleeding Edge* (2013), represent the outliers of the frontier motif in Pynchon's canon. *V.* presents the concept of frontier in a nascent form through its focus on European colonial practices – particularly in Africa. At the opposite end, *Bleeding Edge* is critically tied to the events of 9/11 and to a New York setting, yet its focus on online culture represents a spiritual descendant to Pynchon's earlier work. In the midst of all of these works is Pynchon's most celebrated novel *Gravity's Rainbow*, a text that I posit

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represents Pynchon's most evocative use of the concept of the frontier through its setting in World War II Europe.

The frontier in *Gravity's Rainbow* is "The Zone" – that is the war zone in Germany at the end of World War II. The bulk of the novel takes The Zone as its setting and it functions as the site of a futile quest by the novel's protagonist, one slightly bumbling American GI named Tyrone Slothrop, to find answers about his past and his identity. Since *Gravity's Rainbow* is notorious for its numerous plots, subplots, and characters it is useful to review the salient points in the novel. While stationed in London, a shadowy set of Allied intelligence agencies discovers that Slothrop has a connection to the German V2 rockets falling on London at this time. It turns out that Slothrop has a sexual response when in the vicinity of a V2 rocket attack and that the attacks correspond to his sexual liaisons. The twist to this already odd coincidence is that Slothrop's sexual responses seem to occur *before* the rocket falls. This makes Slothrop – who keeps a map of his liaisons – an intriguing mystery to Allied intelligence who have no means of predicting a rocket's target or even the ability to provide a modicum of warning for the city's populace since the rockets fall faster than the speed of sound. Members of Allied intelligence end up sending Slothrop to the south of France where they plant various ruses for him in order to test his responses. These include a giant octopus attack on a helpless damsel who turns out to be a secret agent in disguise (the damsel, not the octopus, but the octopus did receive intelligence training). They also strip Slothrop of his belongings and identity documents by stealing all of his effects, and they kill one of his only friends. They also feed Slothrop as much information about the rocket as they can, which leads to Slothrop discovering a connection between the industrial cartels that helped develop the V2 rockets and Slothrop's uncle Lyle Bland. We ultimately learn that Slothrop was experimented on as a child and psychologically conditioned to have a reaction to a synthetic compound used in the V2 in exchange for guaranteed admission and tuition at Harvard. With that knowledge and the horror that he has been manipulated his entire life, Slothrop goes AWOL into the Zone to look for more information about the plastic, his reactions, and the experiments he underwent as a child.

Slothrop's quest takes place entirely within the Zone, but before he enters this unique setting, Pynchon alienates the reader from any preconceived notions of American concepts of freedom by having his character escape that "freedom" – one marked by his desire to escape the army and the intelligence forces controlling his every move. This occurs when Slothrop runs away from a pair of American MPs. At their demands that he stop Slothrop realizes "for the first time he is hearing America as it must sound to a non-American. Later he will recall what surprised him most was the fanaticism, the reliance not just on flat force but on the *rightness* of what they planned to do" (Pynchon 1995, 256). These MPs are described as "demoralizing as a close-up of John Wayne" which evokes and questions a reified ideal of the American western hero. As he escapes, it dawns on Slothrop that he's escaped into his "first free morning," but he also questions it by asking "what's free?"

Slothrop quickly comes upon at least one answer for this question when he meets the representative of a group of Argentinian anarchists who evoke the worldliness of the novel while also referencing the tropes of the American west. The Argentinians long for the lost era of the gauchos and wish "to seek political asylum in German, as soon as the war is over" (236). One of the anarchists, Squalidozzi, describes the plan to Slothrop before he enters the Zone. It hinges on the effort to regain freedom. As he puts it:

in the day's of the gauchos, my country was a blank piece of paper [...] Wherever the gaucho could ride, that place belonged to him. But Buenos Aires sought hegemony over the provinces. All the neuroses about property gathered strength, and began to infect the countryside. Fences went up, and the goucho became less free. It is our national tragedy. We are obsessed with building labyrinths, where before there was open plain and sky. (264)

Squalidozzi's description for the lost openness of Argentina represents the most apparent instances of the American frontier, complete with cowboys, in the novel. Pynchon is careful to present readers with the capitalist's rebuttal to this anarchist dream through the still indoctrinated Slothrop who argues that bobwire and fences is "*progress* – you can't have open range forever, you can't stand in the way of progress." We are



told that Slothrop's defense is drawn from "Saturday-afternoon western movies dedicated to Property if anything is." With this reference to film we also see the commodification of the frontier – an inherent danger throughout these novels. Pynchon does not naively suggest that a frontier of freedom solves historical inequities of capitalism. The frontier always has the danger of becoming mere simulacra that may represent the free ideal or a reinscription of the capitalist/industrial norm. Indeed, such is the danger for Squalidozzi and his peers as they decide to work on a film on the theme of the "central government vs. gaucho anarchism" only to have the film's German director point out that the film's story ends with "even the freest of Gauchos [...] selling out" (386-387).

Yet the setting of the Zone allows for an opportunity of freedom thanks to the destructive propensities of "progress" – in this case more efficient ways to kill found in modern warfare. According to Squalidozzi, his group's hope for a "community of grace" requires extraordinary times. As he puts it:

in ordinary times [...] the center always wins. Its power grows with time, and that can't be reversed, not by ordinary means. Decentralizing, back toward anarchism, needs extraordinary times...this War – this incredible War – just for the moment has wiped out the proliferation of little states that's prevailed in Germany for a thousand years. Wiped it clean. *Opened it* [...] We want to leave it open. We want it to grow, to change. In the openness of the German Zone our hope is limitless [...] so is our danger. (264-265)

The Zone is then a clean slate – a return to the sense of the openness and possibilities found in symbolism of the frontier, though notably one that is openly contingent upon the destruction of war rather than elided as might be the case in those pop Saturday-afternoon films of Slothrop's. Inherent in this is the ideology of anarchism and the decentralization of power systems. As Benton has argued, in anarchist thought there is reluctance "to adhere to any master narrative as a viable representational means of theorizing the anarchist project," and as such it "demands an open-ended configuration of strategies of resistance" (1998, 153). There is then an intrinsic danger for any actual plan to destroy the anarchist's frontier and the idea the Zone represents. Thus Slothrop, Squalidozzi, and the rest of the novel's would be frontiersmen and women end up wandering rather than settling.

The Zone as frontier also holds a particular threat of being romanticized by readers and critics. As Steven Weisenburger has noted, there is a tendency for the Zone to symbolize "the seeming suspension of bad rhetorical binaries and the promise of a Return to the primal homelands where some originary historical and cultural singularity might promise a *way out* of the current political dilemmas" (2009, 104). Weisenburger's skepticism of a romantic Zone is well placed, particularly in light of the novel's representation of displaced persons. These refugees represent a suffering class that the novel tangentially touches upon again and again through Slothrop's travels. Yet this frontier need not be romanticized, and indeed Pynchon goes to great lengths to avoid Romanticization. Pynchon's characters search for an ideal in the frontier, but they rarely find anything so lofty. Instead his characters are – like Oedipa Maas looking at that printed circuit of a California subdivision – at the threshold of a revelation which immediately retreats. Instead of being an ideal, as Squalidozzi sees it, the Zone, and all the symbolic frontiers in Pynchon's works represent the opportunity for – not the promise of – change. Or, as Oedipa might phrase it at the end of her own journey, the chance for an anarchist's miracle.

Pynchon uses the Zone and its manifestations of freedom as the means of inserting access points for randomness into systems of totalizing control – those capitalist/Christer gridworks – that his characters chafe against. This appears in *Gravity's Rainbow* with the assertion of Gödel's Theorem also restated as Murphy's Law: "*when everything has been taken care of, when nothing can go wrong, or even surprise us...something will*" (Pynchon 1995, 275). As Margaret Lynd has noted, the introduction to the theorem establishes the "premise that the world is so complex that an element of randomness, uncertainty, or unpredictability is always present" and that this "randomness is a crucial element because it opens a space for agency" (2004, 64). For our purposes we might emphasize Lynd's use of the phrase "open space."



Pynchon's frontiers remind us of both the necessity of this uncertainty as well as its potential cost. As Wiesenburger notes in his warnings of romanticizing, the political ambiguity of the Zone "demolishes individuality and realizes [the] deepest desires for control and dominion" as it becomes the "space wherein sovereignty denationalizes and denaturalizes the subject" (2009, 106). Displaced persons become refugees with no rights, no safety, and no resources. This can be seen symbolically in Slothrop's fate at the end of the novel. Rather than coming to an understanding about his past and identity, Slothrop essentially disintegrates. By the end of the novel, he is "one plucked albatross [...] scattered all over the Zone. It's doubtful if he can ever be 'found' again, in the conventional sense of 'positively identified and detained'" (Pynchon 1995, 712). Slothrop escapes the capitalist system and punishment for being AWOL by dropping out and, essentially, ceasing to be.

While Slothrop's dissolution would suggest that the Zone and other frontiers of freedom are mere romantic fantasies, we have to take into account the narrative itself and the way it frames Slothrop's fate. The Zone and the looming apocalypse that permeates the end of the novel represent a moment where, as one of the novel's numerous secondary characters puts it, "the hidden machinery [is] easier to see in the days leading up to the event" and that "the edges are apt to lift, briefly, and we see things we were not meant to...." (474). If we read *Gravity's Rainbow* as an event, culminating in the dissolution of Slothrop, we also need to look for the hidden machinery built into the structure of the novel. Instead of Slothrop's failure, we see the industrial and capitalist machinery that manipulates him as well as his moments of peace as he gives up playing Their game. At one point prior to his dissolution, we learn that Slothrop "likes to spend whole days naked" communing with nature (623). While there are "any number of directions he ought to be moving in . . . he'd rather stay right here for now." As Deborah Madsen posits, by abandoning the obsession for understanding Slothrop is "rejecting the identity that 'They' have inscribed upon him" (1991, 101). His rejection "transforms his interpretative quest into something extrinsic to and imposed upon him." This corresponds with the reader's need to impose upon Slothrop an identity and a closure to his quest – the basis for so much of the novel's plot.

A more productive approach is to take into account the setting and Slothrop's position in this scene. We are told that Slothrop "becomes a cross himself, a crossroads" (Pynchon 1995, 625). This position is a reference to an even more poignant crossroad – that of Slothrop's iconoclastic puritan ancestor, William, who argued for the holiness of the preterite and the forsaken. Earlier in the text the narrator asks:

Could [William] have been the fork in the road America never took, the singular point she jumped the wrong way from? Suppose the Slothropite heresy had had the time to consolidate and prosper? Might there have been fewer crimes in the name of Jesus, and more mercy in the name of Judas Iscariot? It seems to Tyrone Slothrop that there might be a route back [...] maybe for a little while all the fences are down, one road as good as another, the whole space of the Zone cleared, depolarized and somewhere inside the waste of it a single set of coordinates from which to proceed, without elect, without preterite, without even nationality to fuck it up... (556)

The Zone, this frontier, and the harmony Slothrop finds as he symbolically becomes a crossroads emphasizes the chance – and it's just a chance – for alternate paths.

The moment is, of course, fleeting. Slothrop, who was "sent into the Zone to be present at his own assembly" dissolves into something less than a character and more a symbolic set of figures – harmonica and kazoo playing drifters, hippies, and an audience full of doomed filmgoers (738). As he dissolves the novel fast forwards to the 1970s and readers are left in the Orpheus Theater in Los Angeles with ICBMs – the descendants of the V2 rocket – in the air and a nuclear apocalypse looming over the entire scene. As we sit in the theater filled with Slothropian figures our fates are left in suspension as the rocket "reaches its last unmeasurable gap above the roof of this old theatre" (760). Yet the doom is suspended indefinitely and Pynchon turns one last time to the concept of the Zone. The novel closes with a hymn by the puritan William Slothrop:



There is a Hand to turn the time,
Though the Light that hath brought the Towers low
Find the last poor Pretrite one...
Till the Riders sleep by ev'ry road,
All through our crippl'd Zone,
With a face on ev'ry mountainside,
And a soul in ev'ry stone... (760)

This description of the Zone is actually the last image in the novel, not the theater and the falling rockets, and we are asked to join in this hymn. Perhaps the Zone is ruined, and perhaps a lost cause in the text, but it is still resonant for the reader. We're left singing of peace and sympathy for those passed over by God's grace. Pynchon's Zone and symbolic frontiers provide, if not a lasting harmony, then at least an embrace of chance and change despite the capitalist gridwork and maybe a moment's respite. They can always go wrong, leading to false hopes, dissolution, and even vast destruction. And yet (and there's always an "and yet" in these novels) there's Murphy's Law – one of those anarchist miracles. We just need some space to look for it.

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