Pynchon and the Political

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List of Abbreviations

All secondary sources are referred to in standard end notes. Works by Thomas Pynchon (with the exception of non-fictional material) are referenced in the main body of the text. The following abbreviations are therefore used throughout:

V.—*V.* (1963).
L49—*The Crying of Lot 49* (1966).
GR—*Gravity's Rainbow* (1973).
SL—*Slow Learner* (1984).
VL—*Vineland* (1990).
M&D—*Mason & Dixon* (1997).
ATD—*Against the Day* (2006).

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S.T.

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Introduction

Text-Politics-Criticism-Methodology

> It is not the means which should be brilliant, but the ends. True politics consists in getting there by obscure routes.
>
> Charles-Louis Montesquieu, *Of Politics.*[1]

> It passes, but it does not pass away.
>
> László Krasznahorkai, *The Melancholy of Resistance.*[2]

1. TEXT

In *Negative Dialectics,* Theodor Adorno maps out one of the central questions in Frankfurt School critical thought. In fact, it is not just "mapped out" as such but looked squarely in the face. It is perhaps the most difficult, most mysterious and most alluring question in the vast body of Frankfurt criticism. Variants of this question appear wherever one cares to search—recurring, refracting, echoing, haunting. Like each of Thomas Pynchon's six novels, it is a question indelibly marked by both the catastrophic destruction of Europe during World War Two and the rise of the "postindustrial" consumer society that follows.[3] More obliquely, but of equal importance for my purposes here, it is also a question that testifies to the "death" of the historical avant-garde art forms,[4] to the absorption of avant-garde art into an all-pervasive "culture industry"[5] or what is now generally understood as the globalized mass media. It is a question that signposts the outer limits of Frankfurt critical thinking but at the same time ensures the ongoing legacy of the dialectics project, even at the point of its exhaustion. All of these issues will become clearer over the course of this introduction and, I hope, over the course of this study as a whole. Together, they cohere into a kind of temporary structure, a launch pad, a crossroads, a place of departure and return. For now though, still painting in very broad strokes, here comes that Big Question.

It can be phrased, at least provisionally, along the following lines: How is it possible in the modern age—in the hyper-administered world that Adorno and others were among the first to diagnose—to "open up" what is particular, unique and "non-identical?" Or, put another way, how is it possible to free an experience, an object or a locality from the wicked spell of unity? What can be retrieved from the ruins that is not always already the same as everything else? Like all Big Questions, there is more than one level to this process. The question begets more questions. So, to complicate matters further, what happens to the non-identical once it has been "freed?" Freed, that is, from the hold of both unity and dialectics?[6] What is to stop it from falling back into some "amorphous, isolated and blindly natural" state, lost before it has really been found?[7] Answers on a postcard please—and don't forget to use W.A.S.T.E.[8]

What is interesting about Adorno's response to this question (or, more properly, to a set of interrelated questions) is that, instead of developing it through social theory in the manner of Marcuse or Habermas, he turns to philosophy. The question is therefore transformed. It becomes subtly but significantly different; it roots itself in "metaphysics" rather than in any kind of common-or-garden materialism. Crudely sketched once again, the new question might read something like this: What is a "metaphysical experience" and how can we have one? Or where are the places that remain accessible to metaphysical experience to be found? How indeed is metaphysical experience still a viable category at all if our very "metaphysical faculty" has been "paralyzed," if "actual events" have "shattered the basis on which speculative metaphysical thought" can be "reconciled with experience?" [9] The answer (or answers) can no longer be found in the "totality," or in a bankrupted, neo-Hegelian conception of the "spirit" of history. There is only horror and genocide there—"total integration," bodies on the production line, a "coldness" that forms "the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz" and with which the possibility of another Auschwitz remains open.[10] The answer cannot be bought and sold on the free market either. Like Heisenberg's "Uncertainty Principle," it seems that Adorno is "up against a dilemma built into Nature" here, blocked off on all sides. As Major Tchitcherine is informed in *Gravity's Rainbow,* the other side of the equation will always bite you back; you can't "specify position without suffering an uncertainty as to the particle's velocity" (*GR,* 348). Adorno does find an answer, however, or at least an answer of sorts, in a rather unexpected source. As he examines how our concepts of life, hope and transcendence are fatally compromised by the realities of genocide and domination, the figure of Marcel Proust appears:

> What is a metaphysical experience? If we disdain projecting it upon allegedly primal religious experiences, we are most likely to visualize it as Proust did, in the happiness, for instance, that is promised by village names like Applebachsville, Wind Gap, or Lords Valley. One thinks that going there would really bring the fulfilment, as if there were such a thing. Being really there makes the promise recede like a rainbow. And yet one is not too disappointed; the feeling now is of being too close, rather, and not seeing it for that reason. And the difference between the landscapes and regions that determine the imagery of a childhood is presumably not great at all . . . But what it takes to form this universal, this authentic part of Proust's presentation, is to be entranced in one place without squinting at the universal. To the child it is self-evident that what delights him in his favorite village is found only there, there alone and nowhere else. He is mistaken; but his mistake creates the model of experience, of a concept that will end up as the concept of the thing itself, not as a poor projection from things . . . Only in the face of absolute, indissoluble individuation can we hope that this, exactly this has existed and is going to exist; fulfilling this hope alone would fulfil the concept of the concept. But the concept clings to the promised happiness, while the world that denies us our happiness is the world of the reigning universal, the world stubbornly opposed by Proust's reconstruction of experience.[11]

So why is it necessary to prepare the ground in this way? Why choose to begin *here* exactly? Isn't there an easier way in, a more convenient access road? What has all this got to do with Thomas Pynchon and, for that matter, what has it got to do with *politics?* On first inspection, the critical relationship between Adorno and Pynchon being offered here appears tenuous at best. Anyone familiar with the latter's anarchic sense of humour, for example, could argue that "Wind Gap" would inevitably become a pun about flatulence in a Pynchon novel and "Applebachsville" the punch line of some bizarre, arch-trickster routine about fruit production and the history of Teutonic music.[12] Surely Pynchon is too far down the line, a metaphor I will return to throughout this study, for a viable dialogue to emerge? Surely too much has been lost along the way? Perhaps yes, perhaps no, perhaps both yes *and* no. Indeed, the drawing of lines, the destructive geometry of our social, political and philosophical histories, is a process of supreme importance in Pynchon's fiction. As the poet Timothy Tox writes in *Mason & Dixon:*

> Let Judges judge, and Lawyers have their Day,
> Yet soon or late, the Line will find its Way,
> For Skies grow thick with aviating Swine,
> Ere men pass up the chance to draw a line (*M&D,* 257).

It is a shared opposition to the "linear instinct" described in Tox's poem that forms the crux of my argument here. Born out of the most extreme historical circumstances, what we find in Adorno's reading of Proust is a very specific kind of fractured but multi-dimensional analysis. His half-redeemed, lost-and-found metaphysics is both real and imaginary at the same time. It is bold yet quietly cautious. It is despairing, clutching at straws even, but defiantly utopian. It is weirdly lyrical—one can almost hear gentle classical strings in the background—yet fiercely pitched against the "*Blubo*" (or "blood-and-soil" ideology) that Adorno saw as an undiminished will to fascism in Heidegger.[13] In political terms then, it appears that a critique of instrumentality that is not simultaneously a critique of *capitalism* is at best a form of romanticism and at worst a thinly veiled apology for totalitarian domination.[14] Thus, as Rolf Wiggershaus explains, Adorno's version of metaphysical experience is inherently and very deliberately "transgressive." It is laden with a "sensuousness and materiality" beyond what is "sensuous and material." It offers, in a way that a systematic "theory of society" cannot, "an image of what might be correct within a life" that has become "entangled in false life," in the empty reproduction of sameness.[15] It identifies, in a work of fiction no less, in *a novel,* the basis for a resistance to "the reigning universal," a platform for the "reconstruction of experience." It may be starved-out and near enough past-rescuing but Adorno uncovers something in Proust, or perhaps rather *through* Proust, that still has a pulse. Even if, as Adorno himself insists, "it is ideological to assert that a meaning might rise in the light of fragmentary, albeit genuine, experience."[16] The problems contained within Adorno's reading here, however self consciously neutered it might be, are numerous and deep—not least the fact that any sophisticated redeployment of it today must, as Fredric Jameson points out, "bear something of the same relationship to . . . [the] old 'Culture Industry' concept as MTV or fractal ads bear to fifties television."[17] What is more, Adorno is not entirely persuasive in his view that to incorporate "social theory" or "scientific research" into his "negative dialectics" project would "threaten or even make impossible those insights that were gathered from speculation."[18] Nevertheless, it is at this point, and this point only, that Pynchon, politics, and the whole question of a "political Pynchon," can enter the fray. So it's goodbye, though not entirely, to Wind Gap and Applebachsville, hello to San Narciso, Shade Creek and the Delaware Wedge.[19]

2. POLITICS

Pynchon—Politics—Pynchon and the Political. The relationship between Adorno's reading of Proust and my three-sided investigation here becomes a question of beginnings and ends. Put another way, the resistance to the "reigning universal" and the "reconstruction of experience" that Adorno finds in Proust both obstructs and facilitates the emergence of a political Pynchon. In one sense, Adorno's work represents the end of the line for politics. Not just the end of politics, in fact, but the end of any recognisable form of cultural-political inquiry. Adorno turns to metaphysics, and to Proust's misty-eyed remembrances, because the whole edifice of the political has collapsed in on itself. The political, in theory and in practice, is no longer a sustainable category. The boundary between society and the state falls away and the old class antagonisms recede into the distance. Dissidence becomes an exercise in kitsch.[20] The political returns only in ghostly,[21] fragile and unfamiliar forms—heavily camouflaged under strange new terms like "reconstruction" and "experience." Politics, it appears, is innately suicidal, driven by some thanatoid impulse towards the negation of its own revered mechanisms—"democracy," "freedom," "nation" and so on. As Geoffrey Bennington argues, "all politics wants politics to end." The "end of politics is the end of politics."[22] This particular end, however, is not the "brilliant" finale imagined by the likes of Montesquieu, whose assertion that "true politics" consists of "getting there by obscure routes" I have cited as an epigraph to this introduction. Instead, we are at the fatal apex of politics, its *Brennschluss*[23] or burnout, "over its peak and down," its point of "terminal orgasm" (*GR,* 223). Furthermore, Adorno's "retreat" to metaphysics (if it is indeed to be characterized as such) also indicates how the autonomy of the critical realm, its precious *distance* from those structures of reproduction and control that it seeks to undermine, is violently eroded by this "end." The end of politics means there is no longer a bridge between the two spheres; there is no more "gap" between critique and world, just a suffocating vacuum. Even if such a "gap" was a kind of necessary fiction in the first place, this is a process which intensifies tenfold with new developments in technology, media and economics—developments which take us far beyond the immediate post-war environment that Adorno knew. The challenge that this presents for any attempt to reanimate the political, to perform a kind of voodoo, to genuinely invest in it, to build structures on its foundations, therefore becomes a central problem here. As Jameson writes:

> [This] suggests that some of our most cherished and time-honored radical conceptions about the nature of cultural politics may thereby find

> themselves outmoded. However distinct these conceptions—which range from slogans of negativity, opposition, and subversion to critique and reflexivity—may have been, they all shared a single, fundamentally spatial, presupposition, which may be resumed in the equally time-honored formula of 'critical distance.' No theory of cultural politics current on the Left today has been able to do without one notion or another of a certain minimal aesthetic distance, of the possibility of the positioning of a cultural act outside the massive Being of capital, from which to assault this last. What the burden of [evidence] suggests, however, is that distance in general (including 'critical distance' in particular) has very precisely been abolished in the new space of postmodernism . . . [T]he prodigious new expansion of multinational capital ends up penetrating and colonizing those very precapitalist enclaves (Nature and the Unconscious) which offer extraterritorial and Archimedean footholds for critical effectivity. The short hand language of co-optation is for this reason omnipresent on the left, but would now seem to offer a most inadequate theoretical basis for understanding a situation in which we all, in one way or another, feel that not only punctual and local countercultural forms of cultural resistance and guerrilla warfare but also even overtly political interventions . . . are all somehow secretly disarmed and reabsorbed by a system of which they themselves might well be considered a part, since they can achieve no distance from it.[24]

According to Jameson, this dilemma becomes the "moment of truth" for what he calls postmodernism—a "new global space" created and maintained by "the cultural logic of late capitalism."[25] There is no way of discussing a political Thomas Pynchon without confronting it. Indeed, the *closeness* of Pynchon's writing (if it is to be loosely understood, historically and/or aesthetically, as any kind of variant strain of "postmodern" fiction) to the very systems of control it defines itself against is an issue that has occupied critics of his work for some time. Do Pynchon's polyphonic, fragmented narratives *work through* the systems and images of modern techo-capitalism, or do they simply reproduce them? Are Pynchon's novels always already circumscribed and thus fatally "disarmed" by "the massive Being of capital?" Are they, as Joseph Tabbi asks, "any less overwhelming than the capitalist totality they supposedly resist?"[26] Or, as David Cowart, argues, does Pynchon's fiction root itself unambiguously in "moral and social issues" however committed it might be to the "free play of the signifier," a "paradoxical subversion of the postmodern gospel?"[27] Moreover, if we attempt to conceptualize Pynchon's work as a form of *political* writing are we not falling backwards into an

oblique mode of traditional genre criticism, blindly trying to conjure up the "spirit" of an "imaginary entity?"[28] A political Thomas Pynchon must successfully negotiate this difficult road and from Adorno through to Jameson and beyond, there are obstacles blocking the way. However, Jameson himself acknowledges that the "short-hand language" of "co-optation" is a rather hazy, inadequate model with which to declare the futility of all forms of resistance activity. It is too easy, too perfect. Indeed, perhaps it is exactly what They want us to think.[29] The "end" of politics that I have sketched out here is the terminus of one line among many. It represents a breathtaking concentration of politics, a relentless narrowing of angles in which the imperatives of the economic and political system become interlocked, and it is for precisely this reason that it cannot help but overload itself. It winds itself too tight; it spills outwards. The possibility of both subversion and distance are contained within it, damaged but not negated all together. Thus, by returning to Adorno, I intend to demonstrate how the *beginnings* of other lines offer a different understanding of both Pynchon and the political.

With beginnings rather than ends in mind, Adorno's treatment of Proust can be read as a kind of salvage operation in a period of unprecedented violence and decline (a decline that is presented in all spheres as an inevitable and universally beneficial "progress"). However, the "rescue" of metaphysical experience that he performs here, "entranced in one place without squinting at the universal," tracing out the revenant of the lost "non-identical," seems a long way removed from socio-political reality. Indeed, if the political is "dead," or at best hopelessly corrupted, then perhaps this is the point. Resistance to the totality must necessarily locate itself in the ephemera that Adorno sketches out for us, in memories of Wind Gap and Applebachsville and the unique sensitivities of the child's imagination, in a "micrological" analysis of oppressed and unrecorded things. At the same time, resistance must scrupulously avoid the temptation to withdraw into nostalgia and provincialism, into cheap "folklore art."[30] These are formations where the seeds of fascism both old and new still remain. However, compounded by the weight (or, more accurately, the *weightlessness*) of Jameson's postmodernity, Adorno's "metaphysical resistance" still looks like an unlikely way in to a revised conception of political fiction in the contemporary world. It therefore appears that moments of genuine certainty, like Slothrop's rocket-inducing erections in *Gravity's Rainbow,* are rare commodities in these parts: "[A] hardon, that's either there or it isn't. Binary, elegant. The job of observing it could even be done by a *student*" (*GR,* 84). But what if these ghostly experiences *can* lead us back into the material, socio-political realm? What if, with the right sort of critical interference, the images of Wind Gap and Applebachsville *could*

provide the basis for rethinking the political? What if they could be used to prompt an overhaul of our understanding of resistance, exchange, community, trust, responsibility and so on? What if they offered the beginnings of a viable, legitimate alternative to the debased public face of politics? And if this is possible then can Pynchon be read in a similar way?

In order to give these speculations more substance, consider Ernst Bloch's panoramic sweep across the political battlefield of the pre-war years in *Heritage of Our Times*. It combines an explicit, unapologetic materialism with a sustained investigation of myth, dream and euphoria (categories which hover at the edges of Adorno's remade metaphysics):

> It is not only in the revolutionary rise of a class or in its period of flowering, but also in its decline and in the various contents set free by its decay that a dialectically useful 'legacy' can be found. Seen in itself, immediately, the shimmering or euphoric illusion of fascism only serves big business, which uses it to scatter or plunge into night those classes which are sinking into poverty. Mediately, however, steam rising out of the abysses which are useful not only to capitalism can be seen in irrational euphoria. Beyond the cruelty and speechless brutality, beyond the stupidity and panic-stricken credulousness shown in every hour, every word of the horror, there is a piece of older, Romantic contradiction to capitalism, which misses something in present-day life, which longs for a different, as yet obscure, life. The vulnerable position of farm workers and white-collar workers reflects various conditions here, not merely of backwardness, but also at times one of genuine 'temporal disparity' as well, i.e. that of being an ideological remnant from earlier periods. Today the contradictions within this temporal disparity exclusively serve reaction; but a special problem lies in the way in which it can be exploited almost without disturbance. The *irratio* within the inadequate capitalist *ratio* has been excluded at too abstract a level, instead of being investigated from case to case and instead of this relation's own contradictions being described concretely where necessary.[31]

Bloch is responding here to a cultural, social and political situation not yet thrown into outright crisis by World War Two or reconfigured by the simulacrums of postmodernity (*Heritage of Our Times* was first published in 1935). Nevertheless, his description of the "temporal disparities" contained within capitalism and his commitment to a *concrete* analysis of these romantic, excluded and irrational forces are of great importance for my purposes here. This is because Bloch's stance paves the way for a direct link back into a

very tangible political world of work, struggle and resistance—a world that Adorno deliberately seals himself off from. Simultaneously, categories such as metaphysics, magic, dream and myth (which are crucial to any reading of Pynchon) can all be incorporated into an oblique but rigorous mode of political analysis. Indeed, they become serious political categories in themselves with material effects inside and outside the dominant political reality. Bloch allows us to connect resistance in art to resistance in the world. The "legacy" that he begins to outline in this passage is an ongoing one and his insights can be adjusted to cope with the particularities of contemporary history—though Adorno would no doubt reject this move as a dangerous "improvisation."[32] As Derrida insists in *Specters of Marx,* if the "legibility of a legacy were given, natural, transparent, univocal, if it did not simultaneously call for and defy interpretation, one would never have to inherit from it."[33] A legacy means the inheritance of "a secret." It is a secret which says "'Read me, will you ever be up to it?'"[34] And it is this "secret" that I wish to explore, through Pynchon, as politics. Politics, in this sense, "is never a given" but "a *task.*" It is both abstract and concrete. It "remains before us . . . before even wanting or refusing it."[35] Thus, a series of fissures in the totalising, plastic surface of postmodernism begin to open up—steam rising from the abyss. Unchecked, the forces that Bloch describes may only lead to violence and disruption (a fact perhaps reflected in his unwavering support for the Communist Party line) but they also expose a new way of thinking about viable political relations, a new way of imagining "a different, as yet obscure, life" outside of both liberal and totalitarian models. It is in this light that I shall make the case for a political Thomas Pynchon.

3. CRITICISM

Before I can proceed any further and explain the methodology that will underpin this study, the existing body of criticism on Pynchon needs to be addressed. The critical reception of Pynchon's work so far has been varied and substantial. In fact, for better or worse, a small but notable "Pynchon Industry" has sprung up in the wake of his novels—perhaps somehow compounded by his status as the great "mystery man" of contemporary literature.[36] In the limited space available here, it is therefore impossible to do this criticism the full justice it deserves. However, my study is in part a reaction to (and an extension of) the secondary material that has been produced on Pynchon to date. It is not only right and proper, but also *necessary* that this criticism should be acknowledged. If the outline I offer here seems too lightweight or too brief, it will become clearer over the course of the chapters that follow how my arguments relate to the range of approaches already in place.