CHAPTER I

Introduction

Pynchon's Global Trilogy

“Shall I project a world?”

Thomas Pynchon: The Crying of Lot 49, 82.

A few days before announcing the 2008 winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, the then Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy, Horace Engdahl, made a sweeping statement about the relation between modern European and American Literature:

Of course there is powerful literature in all big cultures, but you can’t get away from the fact that Europe is still the center of the literary world … not the United States. The US is too isolated, too insular. They don’t translate enough and don’t really participate in the big dialogue of literature. That ignorance is restraining.

This unreserved critique of the isolation and self-sufficiency of American literature reverberated throughout the world. As Permanent Secretary, Engdahl was the de facto chairman of the Nobel Prize committee which usually prides itself on its neutrality and unpolticized management of what is by many considered the world championship of literature. That the central figure of the annually recurring world-literary event should air his grievances just before the prize announcement and exclude a political and literary superpower like the United States from the running was unprecedented, and Engdahl’s polemical statement caused considerable consternation in American literary circles.¹

The heated responses seemed to indicate, however, that Engdahl’s broadside had hit a tender spot, and the bare statistics support at least part of his accusations. Only between three and five percent of the books published in the United States have been translated from another language,² and Engdahl’s claim that American publishers “don’t translate enough” seems to be justified. The scarcity of translations is only part of the story.
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of American literature’s relation to the rest of the world, however. While foreign literature no doubt could and should take up more shelf space in American bookstores and homes, American authors are not necessarily guilty of the isolationist tendencies that characterize the US book market.

Some critics do consider contemporary American fiction to be marked by just such an introspective turn. In his interesting article “Open Doors, Closed Minds: American Prose Writing at a Time of Crisis,” Richard Gray reflects on the claustrophobic tendencies of recent American literature that according to Gray is characterized by an evasive “retreat into domestic detail.” Gray argues that “some kind of alteration of imaginary structures is required to register the contemporary crisis,” but he claims that American fiction writers have so far been unable to undertake the necessary transformation. According to Gray, the present historical reality is characterized by a weakening of the national idea and a consonant blurring of national boundaries. In the twenty-first century, Americans first and foremost live between cultures, between the traditional unity of the national state and the hybridity of the global market, and this unique historical situation creates certain possibilities and challenges for American writers:

Now more than ever, Americans find themselves caught between the conflicting interests and voices that constitute the national debate, situated at a peculiarly awkward meeting place between the culture(s) of a nation and the culture of the global marketplace – and perhaps above all, faced with the challenge of new forms of otherness that are at best virulently critical and at worst obscenely violent. What this offers to American writers, and particularly novelists, is the chance, maybe the obligation, to insert themselves into the space between conflicting interests and practices and then dramatize the contradictions that conflict engenders.

In a comment on Richard Gray’s article, Michael Rothberg supports his critique of the domestically oriented American novel, and he sides with the demand for a literature that to a larger extent can reflect and discuss contemporary global reality. Rothberg’s want list is even more elaborate than Gray’s. While Gray especially emphasizes the need for literature to investigate the influence of globalization on American life, Rothberg calls for a literature that is equally interested in mapping the significant American influence on the rest of the world:

In addition to Gray’s model of critical multiculturalism, we need a fiction of international relations and extraterritorial citizenship. If Gray’s account tends towards the centripetal – an account of the world’s movement toward America – I propose a complementary centrifugal mapping that charts the
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outward movement of American power. The most difficult thing for citizens of the US empire to grasp is not the internal difference of their motley multiculture, but the prosthetic reach of that empire into other worlds. A literature, in other words, that is both capable of addressing the world in the United States and the United States in the world. What is called for here seems to be nothing less than an American world literature.

The concept of world literature can be construed in various ways. The originator of the concept, Goethe, considered world literature to be a concrete body of texts that by virtue of their cosmopolitan spirit were able to traverse the globe and challenge the dominance of national literatures. In the last few decades, the idea of world literature as a clearly delimited set of texts has gradually been replaced by the notion of world literature as a reading strategy or a method that shares many features with the discipline comparative literature. In his essay “Conjectures on World Literature,” Franco Moretti argues that “world literature is not an object, it’s a problem, and a problem that asks for a new critical method,” and he goes on to suggest the computer-aided approach of “distant reading” as one possible method which can detect transnational literary patterns that remain invisible to close readers. A similar idea appears in the work of David Damrosch, who in What Is World Literature? says: “World literature is not a set canon of texts, but a mode of reading: a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time.”

Whether one primarily considers world literature to be an object or a method, or perhaps a method that creates its own object, keywords like exchange, movement, border crossings, journeys, migration, multilingualism, translation, and transnationality remain central to the understanding of the concept. Similar keywords also appear in Michael Rothberg’s reply to Richard Gray, and while critics such as Moretti and Damrosch mainly think of such concepts as ways of connecting and comparing different works in the global literary field, Rothberg considers it a challenge to, and perhaps even a requirement for, each individual author in the age of globalization to address such important themes. In other words, what is at stake in Rothberg’s reply is not world literature as a transnational body of texts, and neither is it world literature as a reading strategy or a critical method. Rather, it is world literature as a sort of ethical imperative for contemporary American writers who as a result of the privileged position of the United States on the global stage may have tended to forget that there is a world beyond the American East and West coasts. Rothberg concludes his article by reiterating the need for American authors to “pivot away from the homeland and seek out a centrifugal literature of extraterritoriality”: 
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What we need […] are cognitive maps that imagine how US citizenship looks and feels beyond the boundaries of the nation-state, both for Americans and for others. Such an imagination will necessarily be double and will be forced to balance two countervailing demands: to provincialize the claims of “the first universal nation” and to mark its asymmetrical power to influence world events.¹³

Gray’s diagnosis of the introspective tendencies of much contemporary American literature is very convincing, as is Rothberg’s analysis of the kind of literature needed to address the complex global reality. Much less convincing, however, is Rothberg’s concluding assertion that such an internationalist literature “has not yet been written.”¹⁴ In the remainder of this book, I aim to show that such a literature has indeed been written, and at great length, by one of our leading novelists of globalization, Thomas Pynchon.

The description of Pynchon as a novelist of globalization is not a prevalent one. Rather, he is usually (and not surprisingly) described as an American writer who writes novels about America. This is very evident in, for instance, Horvath’s and Malin’s anthology on *Mason & Dixon*, where the majority of essays focus on Pynchon’s treatment of American themes, not only in *Mason & Dixon* but in all of his novels.¹⁵ Donald J. Greiner’s essay in the anthology describes *The Crying of Lot 49* as “a clear-eyed depiction of shattered faith in the American experiment and its founding ideals” and goes on to call *Mason & Dixon* “a treatise on the meaning of America.”¹⁶ A similar focus informs Jeff Baker’s contribution, “Plucking the American Albatross: Pynchon’s Irrealism in *Mason & Dixon*,” which portrays *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, *Vineland*, and *Mason & Dixon* as an extended reflection on how America went wrong.¹⁷ Each time Thomas Pynchon breaks his silence and publishes another big novel, literary critics habitually describe the novel as yet another chapter in Pynchon’s ongoing history of America, or trot out the overworked designation Great American Novel.¹⁸ One of the best discussions of this term is found in Lawrence Buell’s *The Dream of the Great American Novel*, where the title alone suggests that the GAN may be more of a shimmering mirage than a tangible fact.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the mirage has had measurable consequences, and Buell convincingly discusses how deeply this utopian dream has affected the history of the American novel. He identifies four basic types of the GAN, the latter of which revolves around “the American democratic experiment,”²⁰ and even though he acknowledges that the imagined geography of *Gravity’s Rainbow* is “much more Euroglobal than U.S.-national,”²¹ he discusses Pynchon’s 1973 novel as a central example of this type (alongside Melville’s *Moby-Dick* and Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.* trilogy).
America certainly does play a very important role in Pynchon’s works, but it is important to stress that it is primarily Pynchon’s shorter novels (The Crying of Lot 49, Vineland, Inherent Vice, and Bleeding Edge) which are mainly concerned with American issues and see the nation from within. The longer novels, V. (a special case, as we shall see), Gravity’s Rainbow, Mason & Dixon, and Against the Day, all aim wider than an ambition to write Great American Novels about America, and even though their concerns are clearly affected by the American context in which they were conceived and written, they all demonstrate the ability to see the nation from the outside. This ability is neatly illustrated in a small scene in Gravity’s Rainbow, where the American Tyrone Slothrop hides from American military police in the French city Nice. The MPs knock on the door to Slothrop’s hotel room and demand that he let them in: “For possibly the first time he is hearing America as it must sound to a non-American. Later he will recall that what surprised him most was the fanaticism, the reliance not just on flat force but on the rightness of what they planned to do” (GR 256).

My aim with these reflections is not to perform a European cultural appropriation of an American national icon – it is hard to see that Pynchon’s novels could have been written anywhere but in America – but to stress that his interests and his relevance extend far beyond the borders of the fifty states. Pynchon, like the truth-seeking protagonist Oedipa Maas from his shortest novel, wants nothing less than to “project a world” (CL 82) and to trace its complex history across centuries, and the reception of his work can profitably lift the gaze to this wider context.

Activities of categorization and subdivision are consistently criticized in Pynchon’s novels. Gravity’s Rainbow attacks “the German mania for name-giving, dividing the Creation finer and finer” (GR 391), just as Mason & Dixon lambasts the Enlightenment’s tendency to draw borders and sub-divide, both incarnated in Mason and Dixon’s mission in America and in the Linnaean taxonomy that was introduced in the eighteenth century. However, Pynchon’s resistance against categorization has not prevented the vast reception of his work from dividing his novels into a welter of different phases or types.

One obvious way of dividing Pynchon’s works into distinct groups is to speak of an early Pynchon and a late Pynchon, separated by the seventeen-year hiatus between Gravity’s Rainbow and Vineland. Such a distinction
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was prevalent in the 1990s, where critics saw both *Vineland* and *Mason & Dixon* as a mellowing and maturing of Pynchon’s voice, but the centrifugal pyrotechnics of *Against the Day* and the fast pace and sheer goofiness of *Inherent Vice* and *Bleeding Edge* seem to undermine the validity of this distinction. In *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon*, Thomas Hill Schaub suggests a different way of drawing the map when he describes *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Vineland*, and *Inherent Vice* as an informal category of California novels that “return again and again to the same place and time: more or less from 1950 to 1971.” Even though *The Crying of Lot 49* is very different to *Vineland* and *Inherent Vice* (both of which share a number of themes, characteristics, locales, and characters), this category does have its merits, grouping together three novels that all revolve around a place and a time Pynchon experienced first-hand, as opposed to the historical settings of the Herbert Stencil-chapters of *V.* as well as of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, *Mason & Dixon*, and *Against the Day*. But if firsthand knowledge of the depicted time and place is an important feature of Schaub’s category, then we must surely also include the Benny Profane chapters of *V.* and *Bleeding Edge* which are set in New York City where Pynchon lived in the late 1950s and again from the 1990s up till now. In addition to California novels, then, we may perhaps also speak of novels-of-contemporary-America-as-experienced-at-some-point-or-another-by-Pynchon-himself. This unwieldy label, on the other hand, would seem to implode when we discover that Pynchon himself calls *Bleeding Edge* “a historical romance” or that the “contemporary” *Inherent Vice* deals with a period further removed in time than World War II was when the “historical” novel *Gravity’s Rainbow* was published.

These different ways of categorizing Pynchon’s work all have their advantages and disadvantages, and the purpose of this book is not to spurn previous categories which have often resulted in fruitful readings of the different novels. Nevertheless, three of Pynchon’s novels seem to me to stand clearly apart from the rest of his work: not as a result of the period in which they were published, or due to any specific setting in place or time, but because of the remarkable unity of their themes, their vision, and their level of ambition – a unity that calls for an alternative to previous categorizations. The three novels are *Gravity’s Rainbow*, *Mason & Dixon*, and *Against the Day*. All of Pynchon’s novels are concerned with similar themes, but the way in which they treat these themes and the degree to which they are treated are so different that I will argue that Pynchon does something else and more in these three novels, and that this otherness is explicitly signaled in various ways. In a paper at the International Pynchon
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Week in Lublin in 2010, I suggested calling these three novels Pynchon’s global or world-historical novels, a suggestion I expanded on in 2016 in my article “Mapping the World: Thomas Pynchon’s Global Novels.” This categorization will also be the starting point for the present book, where it will naturally be elaborated to a significant extent.

A number of other scholars have also attempted to sketch an overarching coherence in Pynchon’s narrative endeavors. In her contribution to Thomas Pynchon in Context, Celia Wallhead writes that all of Pynchon’s novels can be arranged into one long story that encompasses “almost the whole trajectory of US history since just before Independence” (note that she singles out US history as the glue that binds the different novels together). And David Cowart aptly argues that Pynchon’s oeuvre can be read as “an ideational roman fleuve” and that his novels “all coalesce as a post-Faulknerian exercise: a Yoknapatawpha of American and Western civilization.” Wallhead’s and Cowart’s arguments speak clearly of Pynchon’s vast ambitions and of his tendency to treat similar themes across his different novels, but I will still contend that much is to be gained by singling out Pynchon’s three largest novels as a coherent whole with a number of clear common characteristics that establish a particularly strong connection between them and delimit them from his other novels.

On the face of it, a novel about the measuring of the world in the eighteenth century would seem to have little in common with a genre-bending fin de siècle novel about the adventures of a group of well-scrubbed balloon boys, which again would seem to be quite unrelated to a dark novel about rocket technology from World War II. Nevertheless, I hope to show that these apparently dissimilar works are in reality parts of a well-defined novelistic project. An initial and very concrete indication of this unity is found in the remarkable structural similarities between the three novels. Unlike Pynchon’s shorter novels, they are divided into three to five named parts, and each novel contains approximately seventy chapters. Nothing dictates that Pynchon should have organized his three monstrous novels in so similar a manner, so this structural likeness in itself seems to point to an underlying conceptual framework. Of course, such structural similarities alone cannot bear the burden of proof, and the following chapters will demonstrate that the novels share so many conceptual, formal, stylistic, and thematic features that they are best read as installments in one main story. An ultra-short description of this story appears in Christopher Leise’s introduction to his and Jeffrey Severs’s anthology Pynchon’s Against the Day: A Corrupted Pilgrim’s Guide. Here, Leise argues that Against the Day is “centered around the inexorable progression into modernity, with all its
promise of doom and destruction and that faint glimmer of possibility that there might yet be another, better way." A similar description is found in David Cowart’s *Thomas Pynchon & the Dark Passages of History*, where Cowart says of the same novel that it deals with “modernity’s birth and coming of age.” Leise’s and Cowart’s statements only concern *Against the Day*, but I would argue that they are even more fitting descriptions of the three novels together. A slightly extended version of this description could be: Through encyclopedic depictions of three historical nodal points (the Enlightenment, the brink of World War I, and the final days of World War II), *Mason & Dixon*, *Against the Day*, and *Gravity’s Rainbow* present one coherent world-historical story about how the emergence and global diffusion of European modernity and resultant phenomena such as industrialization, technology, capitalism, colonialism, and bureaucratization have threatened and often eradicated alternative worldviews, peoples, and other lifeforms, all with disastrous consequences for the planet.

A short version of the same basic story can be found in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, where the diabolic SS officer Blicero pours out his wisdom to his young protégé/sex slave Gottfried:

> In Africa, Asia, Amerindia, Oceania, Europe came and established its order of Analysis and Death. What it could not use, it killed or altered. In time the death-colonies grew strong enough to break away. But the impulse to empire, the mission to propagate death, the structure of it kept on. Now we are in the last phase. American Death has come to occupy Europe. It has learned empire from its old metropolis. (GR 722)

Similar passages are distributed throughout the three novels. In *Mason & Dixon*, we learn that the serpent of capitalism has ruined the former paradise of St. Helena in a short period of time: “In thoughtless Greed, within a few pitiably brief Generations, have these People devastated a Garden in which, once, anything might grow” (MD 313). This despoiling of the island mirrors what has already taken place back in England, where “the Ground for growing […] Wonders has been cruelly poison’d, with the coming of the hydraulick Looms and the appearance of new sorts of wealthy individual” (MD 313), and the same basic process can be observed in America as we learn in *Against the Day*: “the history of all this terrible continent, clear to the Pacific Ocean and the Arctic Ice, was this same history of exile and migration, the white man moving in on the Indian, the eastern corporations moving in on the white man, and their incursions with drills and dynamite into the deep seams of the sacred mountains, the sacred land” (AtD 928–29). I shall return to these and similar passages more fully in...
the following chapters. For now, I will merely point out that the trilogy presents a coherent historical account of (with Leise’s phrase) the world’s “inexorable progression into modernity” and the harmful impact of this progression on the planet – this is what it all boils down to, but as we shall see, the story is far from simple.

Even though Pynchon’s novels tend to be read as American novels about America, I am not the first critic to identify their global scope. In his seminal essay “Gravity’s Encyclopedia,” Edward Mendelson wrote of Pynchon’s international scope and singled out *Gravity’s Rainbow* as the encyclopedic narrative of the global age. The term employed in 1975 by Mendelson was “the new internationalism,” but Mendelson’s description of a “new international culture, created by the technologies of instant communication and the economy of world markets” leaves little doubt that he was speaking of what we have later come to label globalization.

Mendelson’s essay is a determined attempt to place Pynchon in an exclusive pantheon alongside such notable writers as Dante, Rabelais, Cervantes, Goethe, Melville, and Joyce, and the focus in the essay is shaped by the author’s determination to find similarities between *Gravity’s Rainbow* and the six previous encyclopedic narratives. Nevertheless, the essay has been extremely influential and has helped lay the groundwork for later discussions of Pynchon’s enormous scope, and if we include *Mason & Dixon* and *Against the Day* in the mix, the notion of Pynchon’s work as an encyclopedic narrative of globalization rings even more true.

Another important discussion of Pynchon’s international scope can be found in Sascha Pöhlmann’s *Pynchon’s Postnational Imagination* which states that:

> *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon* (and, one might add, all his other novels to a larger or smaller degree) share a truly postnational imagination that goes beyond the international, and […] they situate themselves more firmly within a world culture than within any national framework.

Drawing on a rigorous theoretical discussion of the concept of postnationalism as well as on the notion of parageography, which underscores the subjective, if not outright fictional, nature of maps, Pöhlmann’s book brilliantly analyzes *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon* and shows how they challenge traditional ideas of the nation. Pöhlmann claims that Pynchon’s postnational imagination denies “nation-ness its hegemonic status,” and he astutely argues that *Mason & Dixon* is less a novel about America than a work about “postnational flows and the creation and dismantling of unstable national boundaries and categories.” While I obviously agree that
Pynchon’s work transcends the national framework, I will also contend that his globally minded novels never lose sight of the very real consequences that nation-states have had in the historical periods they describe. Nations are very much a part of global history, and rather than merely denying their hegemonic status Pynchon meticulously maps the bloody trails they have left behind. Moreover, I will argue that the matter of nation-ness is merely (as Pöhlmann himself also acknowledges) one aspect of the broader question of modernity, and that Pöhlmann’s insistent focus on Pynchon’s postnational challenges to ideas of the nation to a certain extent precludes discussions of some of Pynchon’s broader concerns. Such minor criticisms notwithstanding, *Pynchon’s Postnational Imagination* remains an important precursor to my own interest in Pynchon’s global outlook, and I will return to Pöhlmann’s arguments throughout this book.\(^{36}\)

Maurice Blanchot has said of another globe-trotting novel that *Moby-Dick* offers “itself as the written equivalent of the universe,”\(^{37}\) but Pynchon’s three novels have an even wider reach than Melville’s oceanic tale. In spite of (or perhaps because of) this, I will claim that no one has previously attempted to pin down the coherent and ferociously ambitious vision evident in Pynchon’s global trilogy. This book will attempt to redress this. Before I proceed with an enumeration of some of the many threads that bind the novels in Pynchon’s global trilogy together, I want to define a key term in this book, namely *modernity*. Like other similar all-encompassing periodization terms, modernity is a polyvalent concept that can hardly be defined clearly and to everyone’s liking. My understanding of the term is closely aligned with the one proposed by Nicholas Monk in his book *True and Living Prophet of Destruction: Cormac McCarthy and Modernity*. The book traces Cormac McCarthy’s ongoing investigation of modernity, which in Monk’s definition of the term is “imperialist, Eurocentric, scientific, rational, and technological.”\(^{38}\) This concise definition draws on a number of critics, not least the South American philosopher Enrique Dussel and his essay “Eurocentrism and Modernity.”\(^{39}\)

In this essay, Dussel sets out to show that modernity is not exclusively or essentially a European phenomenon (as for instance Jürgen Habermas or Charles Taylor would have it). Rather, he argues, “modernity is, in fact, a European phenomenon, but one constituted in a dialectical relation with a non-European alterity that is its ultimate content. Modernity appears when Europe affirms itself as the ‘center’ of a *World* History that it inaugurates; the ‘periphery’ that surrounds this center is consequently part of its self-definition.”\(^{40}\) Modernity thus originates in Europe, but it cannot be contained to Europe. Rather, like a virus, its impulse is to...