

The Decline of the Baedeker Country: The Representation of Geographical and Cultural Identity in Pynchon's Novels

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Inger H. Dalsgaard's mindful "investigation of Pynchon's Spenglerian vision" (97) shows how "[i]n both *The Decline of the West* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, prospects of deliverance are radically constricted," concluding that "[o]nly the sense that Pynchon's Rocket State is constructed from the earth as resource whereas Spengler's Faustian culture is a natural outgrowth of the earth as seedbed appears to offer room for some hope" (114). This essay begins at that precise point, also combining Spengler's diagnosis with Pynchon's prose but focusing, unlike Dalsgaard, on the latter's specific geographical representations. Pynchon's landscape depictions, while they stand in obvious relation to the earth as resource/seedbed, rearticulate the crisis of modernity as they lead to ontological uncertainty and epistemological dilemmas. A plenitude of historico-cultural layers lies beneath the wastelandish depictions, rendering landscape as substantially more than just contextualized scenery. Indeed, landscape in Pynchon's works figures as a sort of reflective matrix. Although much of this can well be framed with Spengler's rhetorics of decline, decay and disease, the openness and boundlessness often invoked in Pynchon's texts point at the same time to a possible loophole in the pessimistic predicament *pace* Spengler.

In the tellingly titled *None Dare Call It Conspiracy* (1971), by Gary Allen, the description of a child's game alludes metaphorically to the "real" conflict of the late sixties and early seventies in the U.S.:

Usually you are shown a landscape with trees, bushes, flowers and other bits of nature. The caption reads something like this: "Concealed somewhere in this picture is a donkey pulling a cart with a boy in it. Can you find them?" Try as you might, usually you could not find the hidden picture until you turned to a page farther back in the magazine which would reveal how cleverly the artist had hidden it from us. If we study the landscape we realize that the whole picture was painted in such a way as to conceal the real picture within, and once we see the "real picture," it stands out like the proverbial painful digit. (7)

The message here is simple: cosmopolitan intellectuals, liberals and a purported Communist conspiracy try to distort and cover up the real picture while painting a fictional world around the present issues. Allen uses the imagery of picture puzzles in which a foregrounded object and its surroundings blur or a portrait is falsified through the means of expression. Landscape, ironically summarized as “other bits of nature,” serves as a device to “cleverly” hide the facts by weaving them into a completely different context. Allen wants to show “how to discover the ‘hidden picture’ in the landscapes presented to us daily through newspapers, radio and television.” This indictment of deliberate “camouflage” (7) betrays the paranoia of the Cold War generation, the panic over economic decay, the fear of a plot against traditional values, and more than that, the fear of the decline of social order. In Allen’s picture imagery, the fear includes not just the artists and the result of their work, but also the form, the device of concealing. The imagery therefore implies the accusation that aesthetic form serves as a mask that disguises, distorts and finally carries off the truth—before the observer, having long been tricked, manages to recognize the truth. The conflict between the intellectuals and the conservatives of Allen’s time is obvious.

This imputation could also concern writers of postmodern literature who tend to shift layers of historical facts, persons and places on a fictional matrix. The images presented in this literature are like picture puzzles: they can present either the image itself or the image plus the determining surroundings that condition, exemplify or circumscribe the former. What you see depends on your point of view. If you are willing to see each aspect of the *trompe l’oeil*, you can recognize both the vase and the kissing couple. If you fail to recognize both, your knowledge remains restricted and one-dimensional. But Allen claims that the obscuring of the visible is a deliberate blurring. Therefore we should have a look at the literature of that period: we should have a look at Pynchon’s donkey.

In Pynchon’s novels we come upon diverse settings: San Narciso, Echo Courts, Yoyodyne, the Zone, the *Anubis*, etc. With their allusions to real places and their symbolism, these names express their self-reflective character, their reverberation in themselves. They often allude to closed systems and to utopian enclosures. The idea of landscape evoked here, that of surroundings as stable as in a painting, resembles the imagery of tapestries, as Roger B. Henkle suggests in “Pynchon’s Tapestries on the Western Wall.” In *The Crying of Lot 49*, for example, Oedipa remembers a triptych she had once seen in Mexico City while thinking of her own confinements; one painting shows an embroidered

tapestry that depicts a scene of isolation and multiplies it in the painting itself:

[I]n the central painting of a triptych . . . were a number of frail girls with heart-shaped faces, huge eyes, spun-gold hair, prisoners in the top room of a circular tower, embroidering a kind of tapestry which spilled out the slit windows and into a void, seeking hopelessly to fill the void: for all the other buildings and creatures, all the waves, ships and forests of the earth were contained in this tapestry, and the tapestry was the world. (CL 21)

Here a fragmentary piece of history is reproduced in the reproduction of a fictitious scene isolated in the imaginary room in the painting. The four walls, decorated with an endless tapestry, represent the world for the characters; the girls pretend to show the world; the picture on their tapestry that spills out the windows pretends it while covering the landscape outside the tower; the painting pretends to reveal the false perception of the world and is still nothing more than a fragment of a triple picture. Hence the observer of the triptych too is drawn into the abyss of a concave mirror image that questions her own existence, as is Oedipa. Landscape in general and how it is represented are reflected in the tapestry Oedipa observes in the painting: a reflection, a reproduction, a simulation of a possible environment, the Baudrillardian “hyperreal,” where “[t]he territory no longer precedes the map” (1). For Oedipa, the tapestry serves as such a map: a map of America (or, for that matter, of Baudrillard’s America) and of her own historical situation.

The Lost Quester

Landscape, the last refuge of the American dream, turns out in *The Crying of Lot 49* to share the characteristics of Western decay—“preapocalyptic, death-wishful, sensually fatigued” (CL 65). Pynchon’s San Francisco and Los Angeles—and the arid countryside, sprawling suburbs and proliferating freeways between—are a Waste Land of ruinous landscapes and faceless inhabitants with hopeless dreams. The mythical free, limitless and abundant land has turned out to be exploited, barren, dusty and dull. Pynchon converts the American dream into a nightmare. He shifts the vision of the endless green fields and golden shores to a symbol of confinement and decline, conscious also of the European situation and the Spenglerian diagnosis—the decline of the West.

According to Spengler, world history has passed through the phase of Caesarism and reached the phase of civilization—a wintry age

characterized by barrack cities, eclectic thoughts, economic downfall and a lack of individuality. But despite the pessimistic (often prophetic) tone of *The Decline of the West*, Spengler's tropes of cultural achievement, expressions of hope and analyses of mistaken cultural beliefs facilitate, like Pynchon's, a critical view of the ever current *conditio humana*. This often overlooked Spenglerian quality is manifest, for instance, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, where Pynchon goes from America to another allegory. There, the blank geography of defeated Germany affords the naked soil for a new, pure requisite: "In the openness of the German Zone, our hope is limitless" (GR 265). The German soil is an ideal environment that recalls the myth of the frontier—retaining the symbolic significance of a "region whose wildness made it at once a region of darkness and an earthly paradise, a goad to civilization and a barrier to it; whose hidden magic was to be tapped only by self-reliant individualists, capable of enduring a lonesome reach" (Slotkin 11).

Characters like Slothrop are thrown into that new land still underlain by a matrix of German mythology and stereotypes at the "crucial moment" (Tanner 75) when a new political order is rising from the ruins of an older, fatal one. Many characters resemble displaced persons, whose deindividualized movements become "a great frontierless streaming": "so the populations move, across the open meadow, limping, marching, shuffling, carried, hauling along the detritus of an order, a European and bourgeois order they don't yet know is destroyed forever" (GR 549, 551). There is no border any more, no separation line, no distinction among the people in the mass of fugitives. Slothrop speculates about the reasons for the present condition, reflecting, without a specific identity himself, landless and homeless, on his Puritan ancestors: "'they're all out of my reach'" (553). Those ancestors had been devoted to the new land and its forests, making their fortune in paper, "killing trees, amputating them from their roots, chopping them up" (553), in an industry that stands for paper-white technology and history. The exploitation of a new world and destruction of its green wilderness are recalled in the conquest and division of another land, ironically now a defeated and barren land, into which Slothrop is tossed. In the Zone,

there is no more History, no time-traveling capsule to find your way back to, only the lateness and the absence that fill a great railway shed after the capital has been evacuated [. . .] barn-swallow souls, fashioned of brown twilight, rise toward the white ceilings . . . they are unique to the Zone, they answer to the new Uncertainty. [. . .] But here in the Zone categories have been blurred badly. (303)

Germany after the war appears here as a virgin land without a valid geography, without valid coordinates. It manifests uncertainties no Baedeker guide can resolve. Yet this land with a zero topography (white ceilings) is open to the establishment of new checkerboard squares, new frontiers and new fences. The landscape appears like a context without a text or content, like the contextualization of a center void of its historical and cultural inscriptions and imagery. This is equally the case for the world in the paintings in *The Crying of Lot 49*, where as a consequence the form itself of the triptych anticipates the meaning for Oedipa, and where as another consequence landscape has regained its literal meaning, stripped of a hundred years of Baedeker perception and the sublime of landscape paintings that tried to prevent history from "irresistibly carrying the defiling axe of civilization into [it]" (Miller 206). It functions as a white plane for the projection of nightmares and crises of the characters' culture and capital fears.

The Pawn on His Chessboard

Bodies of Pynchon's characters, especially in *V.*, often become technical, assembled, even artificial objects, extensions of their technical world (like *V.* herself) or of the landscape: Fausto Maijstral reports having "taken on much of the non-humanity of the debris, crushed stone, broken masonry, destroyed churches and auberges of his city" (*V.* 307). Similarly, in *Gravity's Rainbow* Slothrop is disassembled; along the way, ironically, he becomes a crossroads, in a country without a grid (or crossroads), the vastness of postwar Germany.

In the literature of the modern (for example, Henrik Ibsen, Thomas Mann), fatal disease is often the symbol of a dismantling process. Conspicuously reverberating with Spengler's cultural critique, this trope indicates the destruction both of the body and of social bonds as well as the annihilation of cultural commitment. Ultimately, "[i]n both Spengler and Pynchon, life cycles climax in death" (Dalsgaard 112). Pynchon's fragmented bodies reveal the dismantling and annihilation of the interdependence of man and nature, inasmuch as the environment (identified by technological and political structures) reduces the characters to physical entities instead of humans with an aesthetic and virtuous expression (see Poirier 9ff.).

Lacking as they do the opportunity to act in a specific terrain, figures in Pynchon's novels are drawn loosely into the plot and its form, spaced out, "without even nationality" (GR 556). Or they are entrapped in the closed systems of their own selves: Metzger is encapsulated in narcissism, Mucho Maas in madness, and Father Fairing in the sewer.

They appear to be unstructured, uncentered in their own world as well as in the construction of the narrative. This is obvious in protagonists like Pökler and Mondaugen in *Gravity's Rainbow*, who are incapable of assuming responsibility for their role in history and for their role in the narrative. Both take part in the construction of the V-2 rocket; both support indirectly the politics of the Third Reich; neither opposes or questions the totalitarian regime; so both become fellow travelers in a deadly system but without assuming a specific role in it. Benny Profane also emerges as such a character, an aimless yo-yo with an empty existence in an ungraspable world.

Many of Pynchon's characters fail to mark out their own world and thus act in an environment which shapes and defines their identities. Since this environment is absurd, undefined, marked by invalid historical ideas and social conditions, Pynchon's narrative strategy and the function of his characters are mutually dependent. Oedipa's note "Shall I project a world?" (CL 87) reflects the isolation in this paranoid world and a quest for something beyond what is said to constitute reality—simulated or textual—to ascertain its borders. Sometimes Slothrop leaves his reality behind, through the black hole of a toilet bowl, or in a pig costume, to escape his identity. Yet there is no archetypal realm to return to, no identity to regain. There is just the chance of being different and hence the experience of the Other, which simulates a trace of reality in its perception of difference. For this reason, the illusion of order becomes obvious, and so does the resulting desire to establish coordinates of orientation.¹ Hence Squalidozzi declares: "We are obsessed with building labyrinths, where before there was open plain and sky. To draw ever more complex patterns on the blank sheet. We cannot abide that *openness*: it is terror to us" (GR 264; Pynchon's emphasis).

The artificial creation of order becomes apparent through Slothrop's map of his erections in London. The locations of his sexual encounters (perhaps real, perhaps fantasied), identical to those of rocket impacts, spur a rage for order, or inspire the "mysticism of order" (Ickstadt, back cover), the compulsory dilemma of the modern. According to Pierre-Yves Petillon, we "must impose a phantom topography on the country, project a Baedeker grid onto it, to protect against the savage without and to exorcise the savage within" (7). This assumption reminds us of Oedipa's attempt to find the Tristero organization, a "shadowy presence without a distinct locale of its own, a realm inferred only by discrepancies and coincidences in the California landscape" (Clark 117). Oedipa's desire for a map or orientation stands for the quest for a stable vantage point in a world that evades our sense of reality.

What we find in Pynchon's novels is the decline of a country, a once-more fictionalized and abstract country which appears as the outline of a Baedeker guide: Pynchon's novels as Baedekers, but with a twist. A guidebook offers limited, selected and isolated information which claims to be a complete picture of the world but can be only a biased extract of reality. And travelers tend to concentrate on pictures and maps rather than on authentic surroundings. The functional similarity between character and reader tells a different story, however, pointing to the futility of any attempt to escape the plot by looking at the map like tourists at a Baedeker and dismissing the fact that our own world—the world of us readers of Pynchon's Baedekeriads—is at stake here as well. Characters constantly try to establish new geographical ground, as does Father Fairing in *V.* by creating social structures among rats when he lives below the grid of city streets, in the sewer. Whenever readers try to establish connections as if they were moving the pawns on the grid of Pynchon's chessboard, they find themselves in the same dilemma as the protagonists, who constantly move toward the zero of the grid—toward something that is not on the map. With no milestones to orient themselves, characters and readers alike experience the absence of history, the new uncertainty, as deliberately created labyrinthine patterns on blank sheets on which they are constantly striving.

Pynchon's Last Stand

While *The Crying of Lot 49* shows the decline of the former promising land into a wasteland, *Gravity's Rainbow* depicts the dismantling of the whole world. *Vineland* shifts from German allegories toward Japanese economic imperialism, and moves back from the great metaphor of decaying Europe to another portrait of America. The novel touches on sixties youth-liberation and Zen Buddhism, on seventies hippie culture and on outlooks for the eighties. Through power relations, technology, progress and enterprise, it reveals the generational conflict Richard Hofstadter describes as "heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspirational fantasy" (3).

In his latest novel, *Mason & Dixon*, Pynchon offers a denser version of what became obvious in his earlier work: that landscape is more than contextualized scenery. It is a sort of reflective matrix. It has become the dividing line of the American dream, the frontier, which is evident in its dichotomies: boundlessness and crowding, wilderness and entrapment, fertility and exploitation. The density is also evoked by a character in the novel: "I wondered if somewhere in that American

Wilderness there might be a Path, not yet discover'd, to lead me out of my Perplexity, and into a place of Safety" (M&D 380).

A place of safety: once more Pynchon's characters ask for their measurable position in the world; in *Mason & Dixon* they strive for answers through the laws of physics. English astronomer Mason and surveyor Dixon encounter the land like the first conquerors by ship. The ultimate aim of their enterprise is to establish an "American identity," something that recalls the initiation of the technical era resulting from British colonization of the new continent. What do these facts intimate is the American identity? A surrogate for European development, dreams, megalomania? Mason and Dixon's penetration into allegedly untouched nature proves that the aim was actually less to develop an American identity than to acquire free land for the landless, an acquisition that oppressed other identities.

The coordinates of the Mason-Dixon Line define not just geographical landmarks but a future political border in the emerging Civil War between the liberal, industrial North and the slave-holding, agricultural South. The men cut a vista through the real landscape: trees are felled, mountains conquered. The principle of mapping overrules naturalness, with the result that, as one character realizes, "We only think we occupy a solid, Brick-and-Timber City,—in Reality, we live upon a Map'" (M&D 482). This living on a map invokes Henkle's image again: landmarks serve as elements with which to embroider a picture whose threads are familiar features of common life, while at the same time that picture degrades the newly conceived to a mere tapestry that overlays the original view of the world.

Diagnosis of the Decline

Looking at the whole of Pynchon's fiction, we could argue that, after a long journey, he comes home again. From the labyrinths of North America (*The Crying of Lot 49*), constantly traced back to the European legacy (as earlier in *V.*), and then up to the shattered and identityless postwar Germany (*Gravity's Rainbow*), he returns to America of the sixties (*Vineland*), and finally steps further back into the past (*Mason & Dixon*) to discern generically the roots of American society and to complete the map of American ancestry. The end of *Mason & Dixon* recalls Oedipa's question near the end of *The Crying of Lot 49*, "What was left to inherit?" (135).

The weaving together of threads of reality may complete a tapestry; it may complete a picture that is not entirely correct but appears authentic in a way. Meaning can only exist and interact in its context, tied together with different strands of thought; and since perception of

reality can only be subjective and individual, we need a tapestry of hundreds of threads to complete a distinctive picture of the world. Pynchon's "artistry inheres in negative capability, in openness to possibility" (Clark 146). That openness is compatible with the reader's own cultural environment, and is applicable to every cultural crisis, making the intimated even more significant. This is why, in Pynchon's case, a donkey that trudges on fictional as well as refictionalized and factual land represents more authenticity than the acclaimed factual, historical writing.

Wilderness, bareness, openness in space and meaning, and a movement toward the zero in an (atmo)sphere of apparent landlessness could lead to the conclusion that "the most regularly-lamented limitation shared by Spengler and Pynchon is . . . that so little room is left for hope in their works" (Dalsgaard 105). But against this diagnosis, we may recognize an openness that develops from artistic pastiche toward functional history, confirmed in *Mason & Dixon*: "Time is the space that may not be seen" (326). By the same token—and against the grain of much current Pynchon criticism—we may see a redemptive potential inherent in the following lines:

Earthly Paradise [. . .] ever behind the sunset, safe till the next Territory to the West be seen and recorded, measur'd and tied in, back into the Net-Work of Points already known, that slowly triangulates its Way into the Continent, changing all from subjunctive to declarative, reducing Possibilities to Simplicities that serve the ends of Governments,—winning away from the realm of the Sacred, its Borderlands one by one, and assuming them unto the bare mortal World that is our home, and our Despair. (345)

As Friedrich Kittler argues, there is no technological, social or political secret behind the pages, but the boundless extension of historico-cultural conjuring. Without this boundlessness in Pynchon's work, however, we would lack the opportunity to outgrow the dilemma resulting from the more frayed implications of our postmodernity.

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Note

¹"This Heideggerian sense of 'thrownness' forces Pynchon's characters to concoct paranoid visions as a way of establishing some sense of having control over their lives" (Smith 246).

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