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Writing (at) the End: Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge*

Brian Chappell

- 1 Thomas Pynchon has spent his career writing about the end of the world, though his novels are anything but ordinary chronicles. This essay will discuss how Pynchon imbues his narratives with a humanistic, “ordinary,” response to the posthuman eschatological milieu he depicts. He does so in his endings, where vulnerability, community, and care for the souls of others take center stage. But these endings obtain their humanism by emerging from an eschatological atmosphere. Pynchon’s eschatology is often viewed in two ways. On the one hand, he depicts eschatological events, such as the falling of the rocket in *Gravity’s Rainbow* or the Tunguska Event in *Against the Day*, among many others. Alongside eschatological events, Pynchon also depicts an eschatological process. Pynchon’s earlier work exhibited a preoccupation with entropy, a process whereby the universe, and, by extension, human life reaches its natural and unavoidable end. Recently, however, Pynchon has been more directly concerned with world domination, the incremental folding of diversity under an umbrella of technocratic control. So *Mason & Dixon* depicts the devastation that began with the first charting of the American landscape; *Against the Day* chronicles the final conquest of industrial capitalism; *Inherent Vice* continues *Vineland*’s theme of the lost opportunity that was the 1960s. In *Bleeding Edge*, one encounters both kinds of eschatological narrative. The novel depicts the events of September 11, 2001, which heralded a new eschatological mindset. But the “atrocious,” as it is called in the novel, also occurs amid the backdrop of the dot-com meltdown of the late 1990s, whereby the Internet, formerly a bastion of freedom and anonymity, comes under the control of corporate and governmental enterprises. In each of these novels, Pynchon posits a human response, a way of proceeding in the face of these faceless forces. Such a response has been the object of some critical debate, with some lauding Pynchon’s humanism, others lamenting a perceived stance of despair, and others balking at his political naïveté. This essay falls decidedly in the first category, but for perhaps unexpected reasons.

Eschatological Process and Its Discursive Manifestations

- 2 Before we can arrive at a discussion of Pynchon's humanism, however, we must account for the fact that his humanism is, to borrow the phrase of Antonio Barrenechea, "hard-won" (5). In order to exercise his "mighty powers of consolation" (Lethem), Pynchon first exposes his readers—painstakingly, some argue—to the eschatological process that defines the age. This process contains two components: what we might call *epochal shift* and *ontological pluralism*. More so than any other American author of the twentieth century, Pynchon documents in fiction the tectonic movements of American history, to the extent that his entire *oeuvre* can be viewed as a historical meta-text.¹ Each novel within this meta-text depicts a moment of dramatic (and usually catastrophic) change, from the moment that America was first mapped by Europeans, to the onslaught of world wars and subsequent multi-national efforts to control the world, to the failed promise of the 1960s, to the reining-in of the Internet. The epochal shifts these novels depict are open wounds, and Pynchon's extended exploration of them leaves little room for hope, to say nothing of optimism. In general, these shifts are points that mark a movement from the openness of the world to its domination.²
- 3 Embedded within these macro-narratives of epochal shifts are micro-level narratives that spool out multiple worlds, both possible and impossible, human and inhuman. These worlds arrive in uncanny and modally illogical fashion, as intruding narrative levels, or ontological rabbit holes, fever dreams, or entire subterranean off-grid societies, imperceptible by the un-vigilant or too-tightly wound. They are spaces of play, freedom, privacy, and community; they are manifestations of what John McClure calls Pynchon's "radically pluralistic, exuberantly reenchanting universe" (McClure 28). They are spaces of resistance to (or perhaps blissful ignorance of) a burgeoning world order bent on control. On the other side of the apocalyptic march of American history is the possibility of apotheosis, of discovering an alternative universe in which peace is possible, the "grace" toward which the Chums of Chance fly at the close of *Against the Day* (Pynchon, *Against the Day*, 1085).³
- 4 These categories of epochal shift and ontological pluralism unfold in dialogic tension throughout Pynchon's novels. As the world changes on a global scale in the direction of total control, the vast diversity of creation adapts, survives, hides, escapes, or disappears. This tension is reflected discursively as well, in an overwhelming polyphony, a multi-voiced chorus hindering the possibility of identifying a unifying creator. In this way, Pynchon's novels are Bakhtinian dialogues, dramatizing the interplay of monologic and dialogic voices. Particularly useful is Bakhtin's notion of centripetal and centrifugal forces, i.e., the forces that attempt to control, align, and dominate juxtaposed with the infinitely expanding, spiraling, and inter-combining forces of freedom and dialogue. The point is that these forces constantly vie: "Alongside the centripetal forces, the centrifugal forces of language carry on their uninterrupted work; alongside verbal-ideological centralization and unification, the uninterrupted processes of decentralization and disunification go forward" (Bakhtin 272). Bakhtin's insights are globally-minded; within any given society, the linguistic forces of what he calls ideological saturation clash with linguistic forces of ideological and social stratification. For Bakhtin the micro-locus of this tension is the utterance: "Every concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as a

point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear. The process of centralization and decentralization, of unification and disunification, intersect in the utterance" (272). In this sense, a Pynchon novel is a Bakhtinian utterance writ extra-large. It is the locus of a cosmic struggle between top-down saturation and bottom-up stratification. On the one hand is the linear progression of epochal shifts toward domination; on the other is the proliferation of worlds in a centrifugal plurality.

Writing (at) the End: A Rhetorical Approach

- 5 In his review of *Bleeding Edge*, Albert Rolls confirms that "[t]o look for closure in such a mystery would be to expect Pynchon to have taken on the role of soothsayer rather than novelist." Indeed, Pynchon's fictions seem to be the embodiment of "unfinalizability" (a term Bakhtin uses frequently to describe the consequence of the dialogic tension described above). The style and structure of his novels, as they unfold in this dialogic tension, elude pinpointed explanations (in turn giving rise to a robust critical industry). Still, all novels have a beginning, middle, and end. Though Pynchon's works are long, labyrinthine, loquacious, and vexing, they still can correspond to certain assumptions of novel reading. One such assumption Peter Rabinowitz develops is his conception of privileged positions, structural nodes within a text that crystallize its over-arching significance. Examples of privileged positions are beginnings and endings, as well as titles, epigraphs, and other surrounding texts. Rabinowitz asserts that

[p]lacement in such a position does more than ensure that certain details will remain more firmly in our memory. Furthermore, such placement affects both concentration and scaffolding: attention during the act of reading will, in part, be concentrated on what we have found in those positions, and our sense of the text's meaning will be influenced by our assumption that the author expected us to end up with an interpretation that could account more fully for these details than for details elsewhere. (Rabinowitz 300)

- 6 Pynchon's novels are often read in a discursively plural fashion (where scholars can focus on one or another aspect of Pynchon's range). They are also read as correlatives to poststructuralist theory, insofar as they purport the perpetual deferral of transcendent meaning. There is fertile critical ground, therefore, to read Pynchon rhetorically, in this case focusing on zones (to use a famous Pynchon term) of intentionality, where Pynchon seems to speak more directly, more urgently.
- 7 I will focus on Pynchon's endings, given this issue of *Transatlantica* and its interest in endings broadly construed. I will argue that Pynchon's endings convey most clearly and ardently his "hard-won humanism" and exhibit his "mighty powers of consolation." Pynchon's endings are not dramatic, in an Aristotelian sense. His novels are more often than not plotless, and whatever plots have arisen unwind and dissolve, rather than come to fruition. Readers can be left with a feeling of lapse, whereby mystery endures and the stage is cleared. These unwindings can last upwards of a hundred pages or more, but the reader senses their onset, as the questions that preoccupied earlier zones of the text are no longer raised, and no longer register as pertinent. The game is reset in a fallout space, which many interpret, counter to my assertions, to be the space of total desolation.
- 8 Pynchon clears the stage in such a way in order to crystallize his humanistic response. He creates an opportunity to use the rhetorically privileged position of the ending to posit something that can last beyond the book and remain in the reader's consciousness. There

are many ways to describe what happens in these zones, but I want to describe it as a move from spiritualism to spirituality. The term spirituality, which might be (very) generally defined as the intentional and deliberate cultivation of spiritual gifts, opens possibilities for important new readings of Pynchon in a changing world.⁴ Scholars of *Bleeding Edge* have noted the novel's emphasis (carried on from recent works, especially *Against the Day*) on such concepts as trust, interdependence, responsibility,⁵ and innocence.⁶ To think of these and other concepts as more than literary themes and rather as spiritual gifts that can be grown and passed on to others is to extend the discussion of Pynchon's place as a postsecular author, a discussion begun by John McClure and others. Religion has played a significant role in Pynchon's work across his career, sometimes prominently, as Kathryn Hume has pointed out in reference to the Catholic themes of *Against the Day*. But to focus on references to specific religions alone misses the opportunity to view Pynchon's larger spiritual outlook, which is cosmic and karmic, and contains activities and stances that might be interpreted as secular and "merely" literary. But they take on new dimensions when discussed in the context of spirituality and postsecular life. We arrive at a more accurate assessment of Pynchon's worldview.

- 9 As discussed, at the level of narrative Pynchon counters epochal movements toward rationalism and domination with manifestations of the irrational, supernatural, mysterious, etc. But by the close of his novels, this tension recedes, and Pynchon asserts the possibility of real human wisdom to respond to (not necessarily solve or defeat, simply respond to) the machinations of control. This wisdom—this spirituality—takes a simple form. In the face of overwhelming power, readers are left with images of shared vulnerability, which leads to communion. Basic helplessness brings people to each other, in the form of family primarily, but also companionship more broadly construed. Examples abound in what we might call Pynchon's "long endings." The following discusses how *Bleeding Edge* continues that trend.

***Bleeding Edge*: From Spiritualism to Spirituality**

- 10 By the end of *Bleeding Edge*, what has happened? What story has been told? Amid the emotional, social, and political fallout of 9/11, Maxine Tarnow, a private fraud investigator and the novel's protagonist, comes to perceive connections among the moneyed and powerful that created fertile conditions for 9/11, if not outright facilitated it. Her romantic involvement with Nicholas Windust, a career assassin who has worn many hats both inside and outside of government, leads to her complicity in his assassination and the consequent endangerment of her own children. New York and the world have yet to settle on a collective narrative about what has happened and what must be done, and so pockets of resistance and dissidence persist around the city.⁷ In terms of the dialogic factors discussed above, the novel's generic presentation offers an interesting view. Since *Bleeding Edge* is ostensibly a take on the private-eye novel (altogether not inconsistent with Pynchon's previous forays into the genre in *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Inherent Vice*), there are fewer digressions and tangents—at every turn something pertinent occurs. This phenomenon is emphasized to an almost comic degree, as Maxine seems to encounter just the person she needs to see whenever she leaves her apartment. The effect is that the reader's mind is trained on the central problems of the narrative, with the playful Pynchonian asides appearing only ever so briefly. It is a plot-oriented

novel, and this mode conveys Pynchon's sense of urgency at the level of theme, themes of human connection and communal care.⁸

11 These themes unfold in the dialogue between the geopolitical turmoil of the surface world and the ongoing reining-in of the Deep Web. Gabriel Ice, the novel's billionaire antagonist, embodies this movement, as he has a hand (it seems) both in the attacks and (more directly) in the conquest of the Internet, in this case, the web space DeepArcher, the creation of Maxine's friends Luke and Justin. Given these two tectonic movements of the novel—the rise of the War on Terror and the control of the Internet—Jason Siegel offers the most succinct account of Pynchon's main thematic preoccupation: “What do the Internet and 9/11 have in common? As Maxine Tarnow discovers, the answer is that they both offered the hope for positive change and liberation, but instead became coercive instruments of control” (Siegel). These two epochal shifts collude to dismantle the possibility of ontological pluralism, leaving us in a posthuman landscape under the domination of, to use Pynchon's famous term, an ever-broadening and more formidable “Them.”

12 Maxine's father Ernie articulates this problem near the end of the novel. He and Maxine are sharing a late-night moment as she deals with the loss of Windust. When she raises the topic of his experience during the Cold War, he delivers this discourse:

[Y]our Internet was their invention, this magical convenience that creeps now like a smell through the smallest details of our lives, the shopping, the housework, the homework, the taxes, absorbing our energy, eating up our precious time. And there's no innocence. Anywhere. Never was. It was conceived in sin, the worst possible. As it kept growing, it never stopped carrying in its heart a bitter-cold death wish for the planet, and don't think anything has changed, kid... Call it freedom, it's based on control. Everybody connected together, impossible anybody should get lost, ever again. Take the next step, connect it to these cell phones, you've got a total Web of surveillance, inescapable...What they dream about at the Pentagon, worldwide martial law. (Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge* 420)

13 Pynchon has Maxine reply, in a self-conscious gesture, “So this is where I get my paranoia from” (420). Indeed, Ernie echoes many Pynchon characters and readers alike, who seek a conspiracy behind cultural shifts and historical events, who seek an evil entity to point to as the cause of their woes. Regardless of one's degree of paranoia about these things, it is possible to agree that 9/11 was presented, re-presented, and then narrativized in such a way to serve the purpose of bringing the “viewing population [...] back to its default state, dumb struck, undefended, scared shitless” (321). The purpose of the martial rhetoric on the part of the Bush Administration and others, using Cold War terminology such as Ground Zero, was “to get people cranked up in a certain way. Cranked up scared, and hopeless” (328). Ernie seems to be responding to this atmosphere in his “paranoid” interpretation. But the novel's depiction of 9/11 raises questions about how the event and its aftermath were re-packaged in national(ist) discourse in order to generate a feeling of helplessness and dependency. A manufacturing of fear.

14 Siegel is the critic who has gone furthest to read this problem directly into Pynchon's project in *Bleeding Edge*.⁹ He connects both the geopolitical response to 9/11 and the market assimilation of the Internet to the broader process of the posthumanization of American (and eventually global) society. “On the whole,” Siegel argues, “the novel's plot tells the story of increasing corporate and government domination of the individual by means of the Internet technologies that make us posthuman.” In this way, the response to 9/11 is a symptom of the broader march toward total control. The novel “reveal[s] that

we are all already cyborgs, that meatspace is cyberspace, and that our posthuman ontology leaves us increasingly susceptible to and complicit in the domination of the corporations, governments, and law enforcement agencies of late capitalism” (Siegel).¹⁰ Siegel sees in *Bleeding Edge* a culmination of Pynchon’s career-long charting of the American apocalypse, which began to unfold at the moment of European contact centuries ago. In the Internet, he perceives the tool for subjugating ordinary people. The end of the world has arrived, not in the form of an apocalyptic event, but in the form of human transformation, a final surrender.

- 15 But Siegel and others discuss the “ordinary chronicle” that is told within this apocalypse. In Ernie’s speech, Siegel perceives Pynchon’s consistent focus on the family as an antidote to global forces of control. He reminds us that “[t]he idea of the family as a saving grace from the rationalization, regimentation, surveillance, control, and dehumanization that result from the development of technological global capitalism has been a recurring theme in each of Pynchon’s novels since and including *Vineland*” (Siegel). In *Bleeding Edge*, a focus on family life in fact bookends the novel, further emphasizing its importance. The opening image, another privileged position, depicts the beginning of an ordinary day in the life of Maxine and her children: “It’s the first day of spring 2001, and Maxine Tarnow, though some still have her in their system as Loeffler, is walking her boys to school. Yes maybe they’re past the age where they need an escort, maybe Maxine doesn’t want to let go just yet, it’s only a couple blocks, it’s on her way to work, she enjoys it, so?” (1). Not only is this image one of family togetherness and nostalgia for more direct and necessary caregiving, but also the style itself introduces the reader to the closeness with which Pynchon’s narrator will follow Maxine. The reader experiences her thought process as she experiences it, her tender rationalizations for continuing to accompany her boys around the block. The reader gains access to some valences of her vulnerability.
- 16 In the final moments of the novel, this image returns, but with a new feeling. After a final encounter with March, Tallis, and Gabriel Ice, Maxine realizes that she has forgotten whose turn it is to get the boys to school. When she encounters the boys, they are ready to go, but this time without her aid:
- “Guess I’m running a little late, guys.”
 “Go to your room,” Otis shrugging into his backpack and out the door, “you are, like, so grounded.”
 Ziggy surprising her with an unsolicited kiss, “See you later at pickup, OK?”
 “Give me a second, I’ll be right with you.”
 “It’s all right, Mom. We’re good.”
 “I know you are, Zig, that’s the trouble.” But she waits in the doorway as they go down the hall. Neither looks back. She can watch them to the elevator at least.
 (Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge* 476-7)
- 17 So concludes the novel. The boys’ outgrowing of their mother reflects the onset of adolescence that has characterized them across the novel. But this desire for independence is especially noteworthy in light of the foiled attack on them, as retribution for Windust’s murder. Maxine has just experienced the ordeal of realizing that her own actions have rendered her family a target, which in turn yields the broader existential realization that safety (and innocence, to echo discussions across the novel) is an illusion. So when Maxine claims to “know” that her sons are “all right,” she is not referring to their security, but to their goodness. Pynchon plays on the word “good” here. The boys convey they are “good” in a slang sense, as in, they can handle walking to school themselves. But the reader, prompted by Maxine, understands the philosophical

connotation as well. Though the boys are growing into young adulthood, they are, indeed, still good. This dual meaning of “good” invokes in both usages the real “trouble”—the inevitability of vulnerability.¹¹ The boys may be “good” deep down, but, for Maxine at least, they are not “good” in the sense that they are ever totally safe and secure.

- 18 In his review of the novel, Joshua Cohen emphasizes the theme of family. He concludes the piece with a suggestion for how to read Pynchon’s humanism across his works:

Bleeding Edge [...] offers an indication that Pynchon has finally given up on seeking the soul of the nation his family helped found. For Pynchon—the embattled bard of the counterculture, disabused of all allegiance—the last redoubt has become the family, and the last war to be waged is between our virtual identities and the bonds of blood; a war to keep the Virtual from corrupting the Blood, if not forever, then for time enough to let the lil’ Ziggy and Otis Tarnow-Loefflers of this world live with the merest pretense of freedom (childhood). Pynchon understands that in the future there will be no secrets, no hidden complots—everything will be aired and any second life, whether in the cloud or in the firmament, will be despoiled or denied us. Adult sanity, then, must depend not on the lives we make online, but on the lives we make off it—our kids—on how we love them, and how we raise them, and the virtues and good-taste imperatives we pass on to them from our progenitors [...] The online moguls have tried to persuade us that we’re not losing a nation, we’re gaining a world. Pynchon proposes that both are mere second lives, fakes. Only family is real. (Cohen 105)

- 19 Like Siegel, Cohen perceives a certain finality to *Bleeding Edge*. His positing of “Virtual” and “Blood” as proper nouns crystallizes a key spiritual conflict of our times. Cohen, whose novel *Book of Numbers* addresses the consequences of the rise of the Internet, here chooses sides in a rhetorical flourish, in a way, one might argue, that only a journalistic platform such as *Harper’s* can provide.
- 20 Siegel, writing in *Orbit*, an online journal devoted to Pynchon studies, also perceives a sense of finality, but, unlike Cohen, he believes that time has run out, that, to echo the title of his essay, “Meatspace is Cyberspace” (my emphasis). The worlds of the Virtual and of Blood have already blended to the point of becoming indistinguishable. Consequently, “as the end of the novel demonstrates, the family structure offers only a provisional and dubious refuge from the posthuman condition because the family is always potentially under attack” (Siegel). This is true in Ziggy and Otis’ case, but, Siegel seems to be suggesting, the point holds for all of us. For Siegel, the only possible response to the “posthuman condition” is vigilance, and he reads this point into the novel’s conclusion:

If, by the end of the novel, Maxine has failed to disrupt the machinations of Gabriel Ice and the U.S. government, then she has at least gained an awareness of the status of the posthuman subject and its location within a society of control. In the novel’s opening, Maxine, imagining herself and her children as classical humanist subjects, accompanies her sons to school through the already automated New York City streets, frightened of all the physical dangers the world poses to Ziggy and Otis. At the end of the novel, Maxine lets her boys walk to school alone, but more importantly, the nature of her protective fears has changed. As Ziggy and Otis stand like conjoined towers both in “their virtual hometown of Zigotisopolis” and in their living room on the novel’s final pages, Maxine recognizes that they are not susceptible only to the attacks of the muggers, child molesters, violent criminals, stray bullets, and errant traffic. Now she must also worry that her sons—like the Twin Towers they resemble—may be “blown to pixels.” (Siegel)

- 21 This unsettled vulnerability, only exacerbated over the course of the novel, constitutes for Siegel “ordinary life.” And so prevails a disagreement about Pynchon’s belief in the potential of ordinariness. Cohen would have us believe that “Blood” offers refuge,

perhaps even resistance, to the movements of the current climate. Siegel, on the other hand, posits that the end has already come, and it is too late to turn to the exhausted avenues of human community.¹² There arises from this divergence of opinion an opportunity for further discernment of Pynchon's intentionality by the end of *Bleeding Edge*.

- 22 Pynchon's endings posit a move from spiritualism to spirituality. If his novels chart epochal shifts that push the human race toward domination, then their privileged positions, in which reside a heightened clarity of message, convey the embrace of inadequacy. Alternatives diminish, possible worlds disappear. What remains, to borrow Cohen's phrase, is "adult sanity." Cohen paints adult sanity as a commitment to family, to "Blood." Within this ethic of inadequacy many spiritual gifts arise, namely mutual care in shared vulnerability, consisting of tenderness, cheer, and at times defensiveness with the threat of potentially righteous violence, to which we can add Benea's elaboration of Hassan's concept of trust and Maguire's interest in innocence, responsibility, and atonement. These concepts apply not only to "Blood," but they work to extend the concept of family into a broader community, evidenced by Maxine's work with her network of friends, especially in the latter third of the novel.
- 23 The rest of this essay will unpack what such spiritual gifts look and feel like for Pynchon. We can proceed from the assumption that Siegel's emphasis on awareness alone only repackages the paranoia for which Pynchon became famous. Though Gourley argues that "a decade after 9/11, paranoia is the more compelling perception of the internet's surveillance potential and ubiquity" (73), Cohen and others want to go deeper. There is an opportunity to dig beneath paranoia and discover a more firmly rooted humanism.

From Helplessness to Help

- 24 In Pynchon's fiction, helplessness accompanies awareness. This trend continues in *Bleeding Edge*, in discussions of how the powerful have shaped the narrative of the 11 September attacks in the direction of propaganda and warmongering. Characters who embody resistance, such as Heidi and especially March, find themselves defeated and marginalized. But Maxine's example offers a way of being that productively combines strength and vulnerability, one which turns the latter into a strength. When Maxine is in this mode, Pynchon often refers to her as a "Jewish Mother," a colloquialism describing more her tendency to worry about and to care for those around her rather than her religious identity. We have already acknowledged the novel's ability to produce characters at precisely the moment Maxine needs to see them. In this hard-boiled genre, the vertiginous landscape of New York is reduced to a tight network, which increases the pace of the plot. The chance encounters occur with such frequency that they seem ridiculous. But more than advance the pace of the plot, these encounters emphasize the theme of community, which becomes a sacred kind of communion through acts of mutual care. If we chart some of these relationships, we see how Maxine's conception of herself as a mother extends beyond her nuclear household and points toward an ordinariness that copes with the eschatological atmosphere of the twenty-first century.¹³
- 25 There are several examples of Maxine's care of those in her extended network. She consoles Heidi in her rage, and she eventually helps to set her up with Conkling. She welcomes Eric Outfield and Cassidy into her home after the attacks. She cares for the

McElmo children as Vyrna, Justin, and Lucas deal with the challenges facing DeepArcher. She assuages family political tensions as her sister and brother-in-law return from a mysterious government-related mission in Israel. She looks out for Reg Despard as he makes his escape from Gabriel Ice. She actively mourns for Lester Traipse, even (perhaps especially) as she is being raped by his murderer. She welcomes Horst back into her home after the attacks (which he escaped by a stroke of strange luck) despite his buffoonish and cheating ways. Her feelings for Windust are cast as a desire to change him (and she perceives in him a desire to change), to save his soul from murdering once and for all. In these cases, Pynchon uses focalization to emphasize the bonds of affection that Maxine has cultivated with these characters. More than vehicles for plot advancement, and more than manifestations of one theme or another, these are human beings of real importance for Maxine, people who turn to her in times of need.

- 26 At the end of the novel, this spiritual mode is emphasized. Chapters 39 through 41, which conclude the novel, consist of nothing other than Maxine putting right her relationships with vulnerable friends, whom she now treats as family. We have already seen the concluding image with her sons. The scenes directly preceding that conclusion are characterized by a similar openness, vulnerability, and care. And each encounter arises outside of Maxine's expectations; people seem to be sent to her, in chance encounters not unlike those that have occurred throughout the novel. These encounters share a certain set of characteristics, a thematic trajectory. They depict the setting right of relationships, a healing that takes place through food, conversation, walking, and travel around the city. These encounters are undertaken in the spirit of new understanding; Maxine and others begin to see that there are benevolent forces in the universe that have their own way of setting right human affairs on the side of good, despite whatever writing is on the wall. This recognition exposes the relative futility of violent resistance, which is diffused in one farcical attempt at sabotage, and then in a climactic moment of direct conflict.
- 27 Maxine's encounter with Windust's ex-wife Xiomara is perhaps most surprising. She emerges unbidden from the subway, which bears "messengers from whatever the Beyond has for a Third World" (439) with the money that Windust owes Maxine. In this moment of spiritual openness beneath the streets, it seems to Maxine that "Nick Windust has staggered forth again from the grave, hungry, unappeasable" (440). But rather than haunt Maxine through romantic rivalry, Xiomara offers consolation. She echoes Maxine's desire to change Windust: "I loved him. I must have thought I could save him. And in the end it was Windust who saved me" (443). Windust literally saved Xiomara from Guatemala, but she is speaking in spiritualistic terms. She uses this tone to describe Windust's cosmic fate; Windust has been claimed by the Guatemalan underworld Xibalba, "where another Windust was doing the things he was pretending not to do up here" (443), an "evil twin" (446) who eventually won the struggle for Windust's soul. As they walk together from Brooklyn to Ground Zero, a sort of walking meditation, Xiomara reveals that Windust visited Ground Zero "more than once [...] haunting the site. Unfinished business, he told her" (446). He became a ghost before the end of his life, uncertain about what kind of business he still needed to conduct. And he could not be saved. In this way Xiomara characterizes Windust in mythical terms, and she expresses a belief in other worlds which are made up of forces that balance the scales of wrongdoing in this one. She is Pynchonian through and through, emerging from and receding to a hazy space, confirming its existence, however contingent it is in present consciousness. In this case

that space can be thought of as both a mythological otherworld and the world of espionage, politics, and warfare, itself a blurry ontological zone.

- 28 But Xiomara's appearance in Maxine's life also offers the kind of consolation that Maxine craves. At the end of the chapter, she lies in bed "trying to summon back something invisible and weightless and inaccountable as his spirit" (447). She attempts to conjure a remnant of his being from the underworld, but she is only able to articulate, "just before drifting downward into REM, good night. Good night, Nick" (447). Though Xiomara mythologized Windust, Maxine's final communication with the dead is a motherly salutation, a farewell that is not necessarily permanent, but tender in its longing to understand and remember. Without Xiomara's entrance into Maxine's life, however brief their bond was, Maxine may have continued to wallow in her grief, without an outlet, without insight.
- 29 The appearance of Xiomara in the underworld of New York may strike the reader as another example of coincidence cast as spiritualism, and her discussions of Windust's soul seem mythologized and superstitious. But most noteworthy about this encounter is that it is a gesture of friendship, which overcomes rivalry and intends to heal. Maxine is transformed by her day with Xiomara, insofar as she is able to offer a goodbye to Windust at the chapter's end. Spiritualism is diminished and a spirituality rooted in companionship (however brief) prevails. A similar transformation takes place in the final two chapters of the book. Chapter 40 in fact can be viewed as a precursor for Chapter 41, in that it contains a futile gesture of resistance in the form of the farcical attempt by Misha and Grisha to kidnap Tallis and send an electric pulse through Ice's server in Poughkeepsie. That the attempt is barely noticed, "dropped into media oblivion" (468), signals, at this late stage of the novel, that resistance in the form of violence or sabotage has become (perhaps has always been) ineffectual.
- 30 The clearing away of resistance of this type, though potentially disheartening, creates space within the narrative for Maxine, Tallis, and March to reconnect. As it does so, it introduces a more cosmic view of power and resistance. Tallis' current boyfriend Chazz, an Ice stooge who installs cables, puts it this way:
- Fiber's real, you pull it through a conduit, you hang it, you bury it and splice it. It weighs somethin. Your husband's rich, maybe even smart, but he's like all you people, livin in this dream, up in the clouds, floatin in the bubble, think 'at's real, think again. It's only gonna be there as long the power's on. What happens when the grid goes dark? Generator fuel runs out and they shoot down the satellites, bomb the operation centers, and you're all back down to planet Earth again. All that jabberin about nothing, all 'at shit music, all 'em links, down, down and gone. (465)
- 31 Though Misha and Grisha's sabotage attempt registers little more than a blip, Chazz perceives the inevitability of a fall. His perception is rooted both in a sense of technological entropy (the march to posthumanism is unnatural and doomed) as well as a sense of karma, in which those who occupy a dreamlike vision of reality will be brought back into the fold. The world that Ice and his cohort have built seems to have violated the natural order.
- 32 Maxine is attracted to this idea, and she sees Misha and Grisha in a new light, as "surfers from some strange Atlantic coast...waiting for the wave no one else besides Chazz and maybe a couple others see coming" (465). The wave, for those who resist, is one of hope. It cannot be forced prematurely; rather it rises from a benevolent unseen force that sets

right a broken cosmos. These insights lead Maxine to rethink broader effects of Misha and Grisha's mission:

Like UFO sightings, the night's events enter the realm of faith. Hill-country tavern regulars will testify that out to some unknown radius into the Adirondacks that night, all television screens went apocalyptically dark—third-act movie crises, semifamous girls in tiny outfits and spike heels schlepping somebody's latest showbiz project, sports highlights, infomercials for miracle appliances and herbal restorers of youth, sitcom reruns from more hopeful days, all forms of reality in which the basic unit is the pixel, all of it one down within a sigh into the frozen midwatch hour. Maybe it was only the failure of one repeater up on a ridgeline, but it might as well have been the world that got reset, for that brief cycle, to the slow drumbeat of Iroquois pre-history. (Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge* 468)

33 Maxine's doors of ontological perception are widening. She is developing a belief in a karmic reset, the inevitability of benevolence, which can counteract the seeming inevitability of the posthuman future. As Maxine accompanies Tallis and March in an all-night journey toward healing, instead of lamenting the impotence of facing power and technology, she understands that even the smallest disruption is an invitation to imagine how the world might be, if only one tunes herself to the right channel.

34 In this way too the spirituality of interpersonal healing takes on the tone of the healing of the universe. Chazz, who articulates an aspect of that worldview, also offers plainspoken advice to Tallis about her mother:

Your mama is the most important person in your life. The only one who can get the potatoes mashed exactly the way you need 'em to be. Only one who understood when you started hangin with people she couldn't stand. Lied about your age down to the multiplex so's you could go watch 'em teenage slasher movies together. She'll be gone soon enough, appreciate her while you can. (Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge* 466)

35 In the urgency of their respective positions, March and Tallis turn to each other. They begin the work of forging new bonds that are aligned with the cosmic bond created by motherhood. This bond is expanded to include the bonds between women in general, who rely on each other to resist male domination. These compatible spiritual forces—the interpersonal and the cosmic—characterize their final encounter with Gabriel Ice. When Ice rears his hand to slap Tallis, Maxine already has her gun pulled on him. Ice's response reflects the attitude of the technocratic class: "It doesn't happen," he declares in the face of the Beretta, "I don't die. There's no scenario where I die" (473). Here Ice articulates another vision of the cosmos, the invincibility of power, the push toward immortality that is increasingly characteristic of the billionaire class. But Maxine's reply is rooted not only in the here-and-now justice of a loaded gun. Rather, she says, "[A]nd the reason you don't die? is that you come to your senses. Start thinking about this on a larger time scale and, most important, walk away" (473). Maxine offers a playful reversal of the Western-style threat. Instead of promising retribution, she invites reflection and transformation. At the moment when concrete resistance in fact becomes possible, Maxine chooses to continue her recent trend of healing and perspective.

36 Maxine invites Ice to return to the world of the human, echoing Chazz' prediction. She recognizes that conventional violence will not bring him down; only some sort of human (e) conversion can set right what he has caused. Maxine already perceives that the cards are stacked too highly against him at this point: "He'll keep running cost-benefit workups and find that there's too many people coming at him from too many different directions [...] he can't buy them all off [...] if he has any sense, he'll pack up and split for someplace in Antarctica" (475), in the process restoring Kennedy to his mother Tallis. Though both

Ice and Maxine had the capability to kill each other in this climactic moment, Maxine's invitation to re-evaluate his character (arguably more so than her Beretta trained on his face) causes him to back off. Though he vows revenge, and though Maxine understands that "He'll be back. Nothing's over" (475), she (as did Chazz) perceives the inevitability of his return "back down on planet Earth again" (465).

- 37 From this encounter the final scenes of the novel unfold. The thematic stage is set: interpersonal bonding and a recognition of karmic forces diminish the feasibility—and the desirability—of conventional resistance in the present. A new spirituality is required. The final images of the novel solidify these ideas. As Ice peels away and the trio resumes its bonding over food and conversation, Pynchon's narrator focuses on a pastoral image that contains the complexity of hope and ephemerality that has characterized recent events: "pear trees have exploded into bloom...for now the brightness in the street is from flowers on trees whose shadows are texturing the sidewalk. It's their moment, the year's great pivot, it'll last for a few days, then all collect in the gutters" (475-6). From this image, Maxine leaves March and Tallis and returns to Horst, with whom she has reconciled: "There is nobody but you, Horst. Emotionally challenged fuckin ox. Never will be" (467). She chooses reconciliation, all around. We arrive then at the concluding image, the departure of Ziggy and Otis—alone—to school. Pynchon's narrator describes them as caught in the same web between hope and danger:

The boys have been waiting for her, and of course that's when she flashes back to not so long ago down in DeepArcher, down in their virtual hometown of Zigotisopolis, both of them standing just like this, folded in just this precarious light, ready to step out into their peaceable city, still safe from the spiders and bots that one day too soon will be coming for it, to claim-jump it in the name of the indexed world. (476)

- 38 These final moments are in the hands of the boys themselves, who are good, and that is the trouble. Maxine is wiser, from many angles. In the closing stretch of the novel, her work of investigating invisible power structures becomes the work of helping souls, forging bonds, (re)establishing communities. The ominous world of terror and war, and the virtual world beneath it, recede, and a perception of even broader cosmic forces arises. This recognition solidifies family bonds. While Cohen's appeal to "Blood" is compelling, the conclusion of *Bleeding Edge* expands the notion of family beyond "Blood" and into the realm of spirit.

Conclusion: A Postsecular Approach

- 39 One may argue, however, that references to spirituality are unnecessary to describe the type of emotional journey these characters undergo. In fact, it might even be fruitful to place these dynamics outside of Pynchon's fantastical depictions of religiosity and spiritualism. Why confuse these spheres and risk conflating them? It may be just as productive to speak of these themes as one does in literary contexts: these are literary themes related to character development and plot. But to speak of spirituality at the end of *Bleeding Edge* is to place these themes into dialogue with the forces of epochal shift and ontological pluralism that threaten to dominate Pynchon's dramatic universe and critical discussions of it. A wide definition of spirituality and postsecularism makes room for a holistic approach to Pynchon's response to what he perceives as invisible forces that move history. With this kind of reading, we can look to reinvigorate the discussion of Pynchon's work.

40 Within the burgeoning field of postsecular literary studies, John McClure offers an important two-part understanding of Pynchon's spiritual outlook. On the one hand of course is "ontological pluralism," a phrase not coined by McClure but one that he uses overtly to describe Pynchon's depictions of worlds. McClure perceives in Pynchon's work a "radically pluralistic, exuberantly reenchanting universe" which is "seriously engaged in challenging secular constructions of reality" (28). On the other hand, the second part of his discussion of Pynchon's postsecular worldview acknowledges what this essay has argued thus far: that the existence of alternative worlds alone is insufficient to the task of resisting the forces of domination that oppose them. Even more central to Pynchon's spiritual project, McClure argues, is what he calls "preterite spirituality" (48). Within a preterite spirituality, nothing less occurs than the "reciprocal process of self-dismantling and communion with others" (45) that characterizes the spiritual traditions of the world's major religions. The result is a "deliberate" or "productive weakening" (12-13) which provides "grounding for belief in real but limited sources of spiritual support, for commitment to the good of others and the planet, and for acceptance of the stubborn imperfection, impurity, and mortality of human seeing and being" (17). Communities form around this deliberate weakening, which are indeed

[...] communities of resistance, but they are founded in and seek to foster dispositions that reflect a sense of human limitation and historical caution ¶...¶ they are dedicated to local efforts at survival, self-transformation, and face-to-face service, and while they testify against systematic forms of injustice, they have no strongly articulated political agenda. (McClure 20)

41 In short, Pynchon "emphasizes the role of spirituality in forging sustainable communities of survival and resistance" (49). Acknowledging this aspect of Pynchon's writing has important potential for how we read his novels. We are able to dissociate them from poststructuralist and postmodernist readings that are focused on "secular forms of political analysis and intervention" (49) and bring them into discussions of the human experience at the millennium. Critics such as Benea and Maguire acknowledge that new readings of Pynchon are required to match the new kind of fiction he is writing. Rather than label *Bleeding Edge* (or *Inherent Vice*, for that matter) as "Pynchon in a minor key" (Barrenechea 5), we should label his recent work as Pynchon in a post-postmodernist, and, I argue, a postsecularist key. Would that our readings of him followed suit. Nothing less is at stake than the survival of Pynchon and Pynchon studies in the twenty-first century, where literary readership and, we might as well face it, literary studies are on the wane.

42 McClure focuses his discussion on *Vineland*, another apology for Blood—it depicts the recovery of family in an ontologically plural world under attack from "Them." We might also argue that *Bleeding Edge*, as it takes place within a similar cultural milieu, is still "at once a political novel and a novel of spiritual formation" (58). The spirit takes the form of community and communion, whereby ordinary people eat, talk, listen, and generally care for one another. In his later work, Pynchon has emphasized the spirituality of human connection. In the era of Donald Trump, Pynchon's depictions of female friendship and family bonds ring with renewed urgency. As the machinations of lying regimes are increasingly laid bare, as the world consequently feels more eschatological and apocalyptic, Pynchon posits that we turn to each other for safety in an unsafe world. This turn is plausible because it is hard-won. Pynchon exposes his readers to the conquest of a plural world, but from that mire rises the lotus of the human spirit. Thus is Pynchon's

ordinary chronicle at the end of the world, crystallized at the end of his novels, which are worlds unto themselves.

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NOTES

1. T.R. Anderson discusses this concept of the meta-text in "Mapping the World: Thomas Pynchon's Global Novels."
2. This essay sidesteps the broader discussion about Pynchon's treatment of history. But the scholars who discuss this issue may find general agreement with my assessment. For further discussion, see especially Hutcheon, McHale, Elias, Shawn Smith, and Cowart.
3. This essay also sidesteps the significant work done on Pynchon's ontological strategies, though my assessment of them are in keeping with those who have written at length about them. This is not the place to debate the finer points; rather I am putting these factors into the context of

Pynchon's eschatology. Though I discuss McClure below, see also McHale, Hume, Elias, and Evan Lansing Smith.

4. The term "gifts" is important. It includes, but is not limited to, beliefs and practices. It also includes, but is not limited to, what we might otherwise call virtues, such as trust, vulnerability, inter-responsibility, etc. To view these factors as part of a broader spirituality will help us to read Pynchon in light of his postsecular poetics.

5. Diana Benea (2015) discusses the role of trust in *Bleeding Edge*, noting how the novel indicates an ongoing shift in Pynchon's sensibilities from a postmodernist one to a post-postmodernist one. To do this she refers to Hassan's (2003) work on trust, which he marks as a key factor of post-postmodernist culture. For Benea, "Pynchon is gesturing toward a reconfiguration of politics premised precisely upon notions of interdependence and responsibility" (150). This essay asserts that these ways of being are not only post-postmodern, but also postsecular.

6. Michael Maguire (2016) charts the development of Pynchon's concept of innocence in *Against the Day* and *Bleeding Edge*. For Maguire, Pynchon's interest in innocence, responsibility, and atonement echoes the philosophy of Levinas and reflects a postsecular stance, an extension of the specifically Catholic tropes outlined by Hume.

7. See Gourley and Pöhlmann for further discussion of pockets of dissidence and resistance in *Bleeding Edge*.

8. See Darlington (2016) for further discussion of Pynchon's choice of genre. For Darlington, the detective mode is important, as it allows Pynchon to underscore a key factor of contemporary life: the deepening of confusion and mystery rather than the solving of mysteries. Pynchon's choice of a detective genre, both here and in *Inherent Vice* ironically highlights this issue (250).

9. We might say that Siegel has gone the furthest rhetorically, as he clearly lays out the stakes of twenty-first century technology and power. Joseph Darlington elaborates upon the implications of this move toward posthumanism, noting the culture of "mysticism" surrounding technology and capitalism since the fall of the Soviet Union (247) as well as the consolidation of eschatological forces under neoliberalism (249). He praises *Bleeding Edge* as the first novel to successfully historicize the attacks of September 11 within the ongoing process of posthumanization and neo-liberal domination (245).

10. Bernat Ivancsics extends the discussion of "meatspace" and cyberspace. He argues that in *Bleeding Edge* characters' bodies become "nodes of information," and Pynchon's employment of fictional characters in the novel "occurs in the form of hyperlinks and disembodied interactions" (Ivancsics).

11. Benea's reading of the novel's ending is a fruitful complement to mine, as she reads this scene through Hassan's concept of trust, which he identifies as a key element of post-postmodernist life.

12. Maguire would offer a third perspective, focusing on innocence and atonement via Levinas' conception of responsibility toward the unknown Other. His is another self-identified postsecular perspective, a complement to my own.

13. The character of Maxine presents an opportunity for a feminist reading. This kind of reading is important, perhaps necessary, for Pynchon studies, which has been rightly criticized for its lack of attention to gender. Here, I suggest two possibilities in the discussion of *Bleeding Edge*. First, one might discuss the extent to which the qualities I identify in Maxine are "feminine," and whether such a label would be limiting, or whether the label fruitfully invites a more "feminine" stance toward the world. Second, one might discuss Maxine's relationship with Windust, in which she pines over him despite his crimes and at one point allows him to rape her, as a problematic element of whatever feminism we might identify in her (this aspect is further complicated by her relationship with Horst, who cheats and is generally a buffoon. Maxine welcomes him home, emphasizing the importance of maintaining a traditional household). I

hesitate to pursue claims about these subjects here, though further discussion of Maxine and of Pynchon's depiction of women is crucial for Pynchon studies.

ABSTRACTS

In work spanning six decades, Thomas Pynchon has depicted a plural world reduced to mechanization, automation, and control. In doing so he has done more than any American author to reveal to readers the posthuman future. This essay seeks Pynchon's human(e) response to these eschatological forces. It does so by examining how Pynchon concludes his works. Referring to Peter Rabinowitz's theory of endings, this essay argues that at the conclusion of his novels, Pynchon takes on a voice that speaks more urgently than the pluralism and polyphony that permeate his pages. This move from noise to clarity is a move from spiritualism to spirituality. Even though possibilities are diminishing, and the end seems near, there remains the opportunity for communion, shared vulnerability, family, and friendship. This essay focuses on how this move transpires in *Bleeding Edge*, a novel that presents, potentially, the culmination of historical-eschatological movements toward reduction and domination. But the novel concludes with an extended meditation on family love and female friendship, in a way that conveys Pynchon's source of hope. Focusing on his endings reveals an enduring humanism at the core of Pynchon's work that can fuel further study in the age of terror, surveillance, domination, and dehumanization.

Dans son œuvre, qui s'étale sur six décennies, Thomas Pynchon décrit un monde pluriel réduit à la mécanisation, l'automatisation et le contrôle. Plus que tout autre auteur américain, Pynchon a ainsi révélé à ses lecteurs le visage d'un futur post-humain. Cet article entend étudier la réponse humaine et humaniste de Pynchon face à ces forces eschatologiques. Il s'agit principalement ici de s'intéresser à la façon dont l'auteur conclut ses romans. En se référant à la théorie de Peter Rabinowitz sur la fin des romans, ce travail propose qu'à la conclusion de ses textes, Pynchon adopte un ton plus urgent, plus grave que dans le reste de ses romans habituellement caractérisés par le pluralisme et la polyphonie. Ce passage du bruit à la clarté signale aussi une transition du spiritualisme à la spiritualité. Même si les possibilités diminuent, et la fin semble proche, des opportunités de partager nos vulnérabilités, au sein d'une famille ou entre amis, demeurent. Cette tension transparaît dans *Bleeding Edge*: si le roman dépeint potentiellement l'apogée de mouvements eschatologiques menant à un anéantissement partiel ou total, il se termine sur une longue méditation sur l'amour familial et l'amitié féminine, qui exprime une singulière source d'espoir de la part de Pynchon. S'intéresser à la fin des romans de Pynchon permet ainsi de déceler un humanisme qui persiste au cœur de son œuvre, ce qui pourrait inspirer une réflexion plus large en cette période de terreur, de surveillance, de domination et de déshumanisation.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Thomas Pynchon, Bleeding Edge, postmodernisme, post-humanisme, poétique ontologique, dialogisme, narratologie rhétorique, critique littéraire post-séculaire

Keywords: Thomas Pynchon, Bleeding Edge, postmodernism, posthumanism, ontological poetics, dialogism, rhetorical narratology, postsecular literary criticism

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