

Toward a Linguistic and Literary Revision of Cultural Paradigms

Toward a Linguistic and Literary Revision of Cultural Paradigms:

Common and/or Alien

Edited by

Ettore Finazzi-Agrò

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INTRODUCTION

Since its inception, the project behind this volume has set out to pursue the perhaps exceedingly ambitious goal of redrawing the boundaries of some Western concepts whose historical path and future developments may today seem predetermined and inescapable. Under the sway of aggregating and simplifying powers, some everyday terms do in effect tend to turn into “common sense,” thereby relinquishing or expunging the heterogeneity that lies at the very heart of language.

This is why together with Italian and foreign scholars we decided to focus on some terms that, both in Europe and in the Americas, seem irreversibly tied to a given meaning. In our view, an analysis of the interplay among these and other everyday terms can help us discover the extent to which their meaning is in fact reversible and aleatory – and this, in turn, opens up the opportunity to call into question some well-established historical and cultural paradigms. In an era like ours, in which barriers are erected to keep otherness at bay, this lexical analysis may also cast some light upon the fundamental ambiguity of our cultures, which, after all, are less and less capable of shying away from multiculturalism and multilingualism.

By freeing words that seem inescapably unequivocal from the clutches of uniformity and simplification, we may in fact grasp the plurality that grounds and surrounds them, thus turning them into unexpected clusters of meaning, as logical arabesques whose actual semantic value and evocative power need to be understood. After all, as a prominent Italian philosopher recently argued, the most “truly poetic moment of thought” unfolds in our vocabulary (and in its lexical analysis).

Thus, for each of our subject areas the contributors to this volume selected some commonly used terms with the aim of analysing their inherently complex structure, in an effort to reformulate expressions that on both sides of the Atlantic seem to enjoy an entrenched, unequivocal semantic status. For our various subject areas, we selected the following triads of words, which, albeit related to each other, head in different sociocultural and historical-linguistic directions: *Tourist / Terrorist / Activist*; *Transmission / Transgression / Polyphony*; *Gift / Forgiveness / Condonation* and, finally, *Debt / Guilt / Forgiveness*.

Contributors were asked to explore the meaning of these words especially through the prism of literature, since artistic discourse can often offer us a glimpse of the reversibility of several apparently given and irreversible meanings. For as Roland Barthes masterfully put it, it is mainly thanks to literature and its “strictly semiotic” force that we may “act signs rather than destroy them,” and “feed them into a machinery of language whose safety catches and emergency brakes have exploded,” thus instituting, “at the very heart of servile [*and, I would add, increasingly simplified and globalized*] language, a veritable heteronymy of things.”

Perhaps, by analysing the name assigned to certain concepts and their potential connections to other seemingly unrelated notions we may unearth the polyvalence and reversibility of a world that is increasingly construed as homogeneous and contained within borders that keep otherness at bay. In short, reflecting on the meaning of words implies weakening the boundaries that, both in Europe and in the Americas, separate what we deem *ours* and *common* from what we consider *alien* and *immune* – for we feel threatened by otherness and heterogeneity, which however are a fundamental element of the intercultural and problematic society in which we live, and whose (linguistic) complexity has always and inescapably lived in us.

From this perspective, then, our project is also an attempt to surpass the limits of our way of looking at a reality that despite its appearance of otherness is rooted in a polymorphous and polyphonic cultural identity, which goes beyond any common sense and commonplace. We hope that this volume can bring us at least one step closer to our goal, it that it seeks to rediscover (especially through literature) the diverse complexity of a being-in-common that does not discriminate against what we perceive as irreparably different, for this difference is essential to any possible idea and viable project of an open and plural society.

Ettore Finazzi-Agrò

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This volume would have most probably never seen the light of day without the constant and active help offered by Daniela Padularosa throughout every stage of the drafting of this collection of papers.

A word of thanks is also due to the Sapienza University of Rome, whose generous financial contribution gave me the opportunity to work on a project I had long been preparing for.

CHAPTER ONE:
TOURIST / TERRORIST / ACTIVIST

HOMEGROWN AMERICAN TERRORISTS: MERRY LEVOV (OF ROTH'S *AMERICAN PASTORAL*) & KATHY BOUDIN

ROSS POSNOCK

Philip Roth's 1997 novel *American Pastoral* famously portrays the life of a heroic, admirable, if strangely innocent, even passive postwar high school football hero Seymour "Swede" Levov: "staid and stone-faced [...], mature-seeming sobriety,"¹ "no guile, no artifice, no mischief [...], what did he do for subjectivity?"² his own brother wonders. Levov's fate is to live an exemplary ethical, civic and family life yet to become a kind of Jewish-American King Lear as he suffers the pain of an "ungrateful child" – his daughter Meredith "Merry" Levov is a teenage domestic terrorist – a Weather underground radical leftist, one of the "violent Uncorrupted."³ After Merry in 1968 blows up her neighborhood post office, killing a bystander, she becomes a fugitive in the Weather Underground. We learn later that she planted more bombs over the course of her political career, killing three more innocents. Merry comes to embody what the novel calls "counterpastoral" – a disruptive mocking force that blows American pastoral – an idealized vision of a blissfully harmonious, assimilated post-ethnic America – to smithereens.

Roth admires this "counterpastoral" power of anarchy when sublimated – in works of literature--his own of course – where they enact the skeptical interrogative energy of "counter-life" and "counterliving" that drives his stinging irreverent assault on American pieties. But because *American Pastoral* locates the "counterpastoral" in a terrorist whom we see through the agonized, bewildered, innocent eyes of Swede Levov (via Nathan Zuckerman's third person narrative) Roth here has a rare ambivalence concerning the critical energy of "counter-living": he both passionately defends the Swede, his family and his "maturity" while subjecting them to prolonged ordeal. Thinking of Merry's "infantile desire to menace," her

¹ Philip Roth, *American Pastoral* (Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 4.

² *Ibid.*, 20.

³ *Ibid.*, 256.

father says to himself: “the violent hatred of America was a disease unto itself. And he loved America. Loved being an American.”⁴ It is not hard in this moment to hear the voice of the author. Not surprisingly, *American Pastoral* has been read as a politically “conservative” novel because it mourns and honors the Swede and the vision of the US his pastoralism projects: “the postwar world. Where people can live in harmony, all sorts of people side by side no matter what their origins [...] no need of that resentment stuff from anybody.”⁵ The novel’s famous ending asks two rhetorical questions in defense of the Swede: “And what is wrong with their life? What on earth is less reprehensible than the life of the Levovs?”⁶ What is brilliant about this ending is that its interrogative form at once solicits an emotional response – “nothing” is wrong with the Levovs, no family less “reprehensible” – and suspends this response – for the question also makes us pause and gives us room to feel, perhaps, the undercurrents of blind optimism and faith and innocence that the Swede and his family rely on. These qualities maximize the Levov’s sense of victimage at Merry’s hands.

And the Swede’s idealism also could describe Merry herself in the spiritual dimension of her political radicalism; she elects to become a Jain, a member of a fundamentalist Indian sect that seeks a “perfected soul.”⁷ Merry has taken the Jains’ vow to “renounce all attachments, whether little or much, small or great, living or lifeless; neither shall I myself form such attachments, nor cause others to do so, nor consent to their doing so.”⁸ She wears a veil, lives in a disgusting hovel, never bathes, all reflecting her pledge: “to do no harm to the microscopic organisms that dwell in the air we breathe. She did not bathe because she revered all life, including the vermin. She did not wash, she said, so as ‘to do no harm to the water.’”⁹ The Jain logic is that “there are souls [...] imprisoned in every form of matter; the lower the form of life, the greater is the pain to the soul imprisoned there.”¹⁰

Merry’s renunciation of all attachments relies on a discourse of purity and passivity that mockingly, grotesquely, reflects her own father’s “utopian thinking,” his own project of innocence. In other words, the

⁴ Ibid., 206.

⁵ Ibid., 311.

⁶ Ibid., 423.

⁷ Ibid., 232.

⁸ According to the sacred text *Ācārāṅga-Sūtra*, the five great vows of Jainism, or *Maha-vratas*, are preliminary to the acquisition of the path of liberation.

⁹ Philip Roth, *American Pastoral*, 239.

¹⁰ Ibid., 232.

neoconservative reading that applauds *American Pastoral* for recovering “real” American values trashed by the sixties protest movements – ignores the actual political work of Roth here – to expose the crippling affinities between bourgeois mainstream and leftist critique. Both – the Swede and Merry – embody projects of absolutism frozen in defensive postures of self-justification. Homegrown American terrorism is not a liberating transcendence of the mainstream but its perverted mirror image, locked within the logic of American pastoral. Merry Levov’s Jainism is an extreme version of the Swede’s pastoralism, especially its emotional blankness, its failure to articulate anything but submissiveness to unquestioned ideals. So when Merry denounces her father as an “automaton,” “a robot”¹¹ conformist – she is also describing her own condition of empty subjectivity. And, it turns out, describing the psyche of one of her real-life models – Kathy Boudin, the Weather Underground terrorist. Bringing Merry Levov and Kathy Boudin together makes clear that Roth grasps the specific psychic dilemma of the *female* terrorist, as Merry rehearses what Kathy Boudin will experience: the regression to extreme female passivity after violent assertion of will (recall the Medical Examiner’s report on another female guerilla – Patty Hearst after her 1975 arrest: “a low IQ, low-affect zombie”¹²).

Kathy Boudin is mentioned once by name in the novel, (as part of the notorious cohort that included Bernadine Dohrn) and alluded to once (in a reference to the 1969 18 West 11th St Greenwich Village townhouse explosion). Roth criticism has noted Boudin’s presence. Mark Shechner sums up the commentary: “she is sometimes mentioned as one ingredient in a composite portrait including Bernadine Dohrn and Diana Oughton, as ‘granola terrorists’, well-loved children of the middle-class who imagined themselves warriors for the dispossessed.”¹³ But the word “warriors” is precisely what Roth puts into question in his portrayal of terrorist fanaticism, which insists on the *absence* of agency – even its willful cancellation – that paradoxically animates their behavior. The most startling dimension of Roth’s novel may be how its portrait of Merry anticipates Kathy Boudin’s own self-description in a 2001 interview,¹⁴ four years after *American Pastoral* appeared. Boudin in effect ratifies how accurate is Roth’s portrayal of Merry, how precisely Roth intuited the trap that

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 241.

¹² William Graebner, *Patty’s Got a Gun. Patricia Hearst in 1970s America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 6.

¹³ Mark Shechner, *Up Society’s Ass, Copper. Rereading Philip Roth* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 161.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Kolbert, “Prisoner,” *The New Yorker*, 16 July 2001, 44-57.

ensnares the *female terrorist*, as if the very phrase, in nearly violating the coherency of gender norms, demands resolution via the reassertion of those rigid norms.

How did Roth's retrospective confirmation occur? Roth did not have access to Kathy Boudin's state of mind; she was in prison when he wrote the novel, having been sentenced in 1984 for her role three years earlier in a robbery just outside New York City of a Brinks truck where three policemen were killed. She was not released until 2003. There is the fact that Roth was friendly with her father, the well-known New York leftist lawyer Leonard Boudin and Roth may have been to some degree aware of some of the family dynamics that shaped Kathy, who migrated from privileged Bryn Mawr graduate to virtuoso of renunciation, hiding in plain sight behind a series of aliases, and especially devoted to a regime of self-deprivation to purge herself of bourgeois attachments. But there was one attachment that mattered above all – Kathy's to her father; she craved his respect and this fueled her revolutionary fervor that sought his undivided attention. So argues a 2003 book on the Boudin family.¹⁵

And because Leonard Boudin was competitive and manipulative (including being an inveterate philanderer with a penchant for young girlfriends), Kathy was perpetually uncertain of her father's approval, an uncertainty that goaded her to ever more violent behavior. So overwhelming was her father's presence in her life that Kathy's political colleagues would mock her for her reliance on Leonard. Braudy's family romance is easy to dismiss Freudianism on the one hand, but tempting to entertain in light of Roth's novel, which makes Swede Levov an anti-Leonard Boudin, makes him a paragon of virtue. The extent of the Swede's possible emotional injury of his daughter is his kissing of Merry at age 11, an act he guiltily wonders might have emotionally deformed her. If Roth has the Swede invert Leonard Boudin, Roth has Merry mirror Kathy (more precisely, mirror the Kathy that Roth imagined and which turned out to be accurate). Preparing for the "Days of Rage" in Chicago in 1969, Kathy grew "spare, dry, and hard" physically, a severity that was part of a larger practice of stripping away, of willed indifference to ownership of any kind, be it personal possessions, romantic partnership – "smash monogamy" – housekeeping – no beds, no cleaning up, no dish washing. This "politicized asceticism,"¹⁶ in Kolbert's phrase, extended to Boudin's emotional vacancy about her participation in the Brinks Robbery. In her recounting of the crime to Kolbert, Boudin, she notes, "is a strangely passive figure. She is an

¹⁵ Susan Braudy, *Family Circle. The Boudins and the Aristocracy of the Left* (New York: A. Knopf, 2003).

¹⁶ Elizabeth Kolbert, "Prisoner," 53.

even strangely uninformed one. She didn't know, she maintains, exactly who was committing the robbery, how the perpetrators planned to go about it, or what they hoped ultimately to do with the money. She now characterizes this ignorance as 'sick,' but says at the time it made sense to her.¹⁷

The sense it made relied on a logic of self-abnegation: "Had I been Roman Catholic," says Boudin, "perhaps I would have been a nun,"¹⁸ The God she served was the Black Liberation Army; quoting her words to Kolbert, "the way for me to enact this issue of empowerment was to put myself at the service of a Third World group. My way of supporting the struggle is to say that I don't have the right to know anything, that I don't have the right to engage in political discussion, because it is not my struggle. I certainly don't have a right to criticize anything. The less I would know and the more I would give up total self, the better – the more committed and the more moral I was."¹⁹ She sums up her strange stance: "I was responsible for not being responsible."²⁰

As a comment and counterpoint to this final remark of Boudin's we might we add the line: "There appeared to be not a drop of wit or irony to interfere with his golden gift for responsibility,"²¹ which readers of *American Pastoral* encounter on page three about the Swede. Kathy Boudin's description of her "empowerment" as submission is precisely Merry's relation to politics and spirituality, a surrender to pure instrumentality, emptying oneself of subjectivity. For Merry the Jain this is the way to the "perfected Soul" of "*ahimsa*," the doctrine of nonviolence that she tells her father, Mahatma Gandhi borrowed. "We are the core of truth that created Mahatma Gandhi,"²² who in turn "created" Martin Luther King. But Merry neglects to add that for these two nonviolence was sustained, demanding behavior, a mode of crafted agency not its erasure into robotic passivity whose telos, at least in Jainism, is death: "self-starvation" is the price of the Soul's Perfection. But Gandhi and King were not terrorists, but intellectual and political and spiritual revolutionaries whose subtlety eluded familiar categorization, requiring new terms, new thinking. In distinction, it is the *absolutism* of terrorism that produces Kathy Boudin's willed ignorance, and Merry's fanaticism, both of which debases politics by turning it into an arena that strips participants – or especially women – of thought, of any

¹⁷ Ibid., 54.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 56.

²¹ Philip Roth, *American Pastoral*, 3.

²² Ibid., 246.

notion of “being responsible.” Boudin’s formulation “I was responsible for not being responsible” in its self-cancelling vacuousness is the verbal equivalent of “the long and pained silence” with which she meets Kolbert’s questions about “how, of all possible groups, she could have chosen”²³ the Black Liberation Army, which by the time she joined them, was seriously depleted and rife with corruption. Boudin, by the way, “left her defense to her father. The lawyers he picked for the case managed to win an unprecedented two changes of venue, and ultimately negotiated the deal under which Boudin, who had been charged with three counts of felony murder, pleaded guilty to just one, and to one count of first-degree robbery.”²⁴ In contrast, several of her co-defendants, including David Gilbert, the man with whom she had a son, Chesa Boudin, refused to attend the trial, arguing they were not “criminals but political prisoners and should be tried in The Hague.”²⁵ Gilbert is serving a life sentence; Boudin was freed in 2003 and now teaches at Columbia University. So maybe embracing irresponsibility isn’t always the worst legal strategy...

To conclude: when Roth’s invented terrorist is juxtaposed to an actual terrorist the result is an uncanny similarity; both the fictive and real women confess to a troubling self-erasure that, in the novel, allies Merry the terrorist with the very purism she loathes in her bourgeois father and in life, an erasure that amounts to Kathy Boudin’s regression to a passive female role her revolutionary ardor had sought to destroy. American pastoral prevails in both cases: Daddy comes to the rescue in the Boudin family romance and even Roth, via Zuckerman, is so compelled by the spell of innocence cast by the noble Swede that he ends up honoring the Levovs. But Roth does so while also sharing with us his profound recognition – that there is no emancipation from “American pastoral”: it is so elastic and capacious a national paradigm that its heroic proponents and terrorist critics end up mirror images of each other.

²³ Elizabeth Kolbert, “Prisoner,” 54.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

HECKLERS, HACKERS, AND HIJACKERS:
DON DELILLO'S *COSMOPOLIS*
AND THOMAS PYNCHON'S *BLEEDING EDGE*

PAOLO SIMONETTI

As the new millennium dawned, a semantic redefinition was in progress in the United States – a rethinking of certain lemmas linked to everyday language, whose meaning had been gradually eroded by mass media, political rhetoric, bureaucracy, advertising, as well as from a part of so-called popular entertainment.

In 2002, John Collins and Russ Glover edited a volume called *Collateral Language: A User's Guide to America's New War*. The introduction begins with these words: "Language is a terrorist organization, and we stand united against terrorism. This book is a collection of essays written to expose the tyranny of political rhetoric used to justify America's New War."¹ The one-way rhetoric of patriotism employed by the Bush government to justify the war in Afghanistan – and later in Iraq – is seen as a legacy of the Cold War polarized rhetoric, that somehow persisted during the Reagan years and was proposed again by the Bush administration. We know that public language helps recreate a sense of national identity in times of crisis, when such identity is more threatened – and this, of course, is one of the most important tasks of politics as well as literature: through a targeted use of language the national (or international) situation ends up taking on a precise frame of meaning. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, language was literally "hijacked" by the government to create what George Lakoff called the common fairy-tale frame of the just war: a crime is committed by the villain against an innocent victim who is utterly good, and who uses his moral strength to gather helpers.² It is no coincidence

¹ John Collins and Russ Glover (eds.), *Collateral Language. A User's Guide to America's New War* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 1.

² See George Lakoff, "Metaphor and War: The Metaphor System Used to Justify War in the Gulf," *Viet Nam Generation Journal & Newsletter*, vol. 3, n. 3, November 1991.

that traditionally the President of the United States has always been first and foremost a skilful orator, a storyteller, if not – and we noticed it during the election campaign of Donald J. Trump – a performer.

Regarding literature, the phenomenon usually assumes the connotations of the satire. Let me now briefly mention a book that came out in 2004, on the eve of one of the most contested elections in the history of the United States – the one that saw George W. Bush triumph over John Kerry: *The Future Dictionary of America*. The book is structured as a dictionary compiled in a hypothetical future and contains a selection of words commonly used in our age, giving satirical and provocative information about their meanings, pronunciations, etymologies, and so on. We read in the introductory note that it was conceived “as a way for a great number of American writers and artists to voice their displeasure with their current political leadership.....”³ According to the elusive Dr. Jordan Bass, author of the introduction together with the editors, it might seem that a dictionary “carefully cataloging the words of our age as they emerge and attempting to establish a standard set of spellings and usages ... may seem obsolete.”⁴ Nonetheless, at the essay’s end it is stated that “the new terms included here offer a striking picture of our time,” and they represent “an alphabetic adumbration of the modern era, one that reflects the concerns and ambitions of the modern human [...], a lexicon that allows fluent communication.”⁵

Apart from the dictionary’s trivial and often unrefined irony, some of the threats put forth by the editors with satirical intent are relevant again – and perhaps even more dangerously so – fifteen years later. “Bush administration’s assault on free speech, overtime, drinking water, truth, the rule of law, humility, the separation of Church and State, a woman’s right to choose, clean air, and every other good idea this country has ever had”⁶ have become momentuous in the aftermath of Trump’s election to the United States Presidency. Immediately after the announcement of his candidacy, more than 400 writers – among them Stephen King, Jonathan Lethem, Michael Chabon, Maxine Hong Kingston, Dave Eggers, Edmund White, Jennifer Egan – wrote an open letter to the American people which begins with these words: “Because, as writers, we are particularly aware of

³ Jonathan Safran Foer, Dave Eggers, Nicole Krauss and Eli Horowitz (eds.), *The Future Dictionary of America* (San Francisco: McSweeney’s Books, 2004), VII.

⁴ *Ibid.*, IX.

⁵ *Ibid.*, X.

⁶ *Ibid.*, VII.

the many ways that language can be abused in the name of power.”⁷ Going back to the dictionary of 2004 and to the desired, albeit ironical, renewal of language, let me only briefly mention the definition of the word “terrorism” as, among other things, “a government unaligned with America,” exemplified by the sentence: “*President George Bush sent an ultimatum to the world’s leaders today: ‘You are either with us or you are with the terrorists.’*”⁸

It is therefore clear, as both of the above texts illustrate, that the semantic redefinition currently underway in the American culture – especially in literature – provides the revisitation of some particularly significant words of the English language. The “official” political language, as well as the language of the media, appropriated some common-usage terms, making a partisan use of them.

In the last thirty years, American writers have contributed with their own fiction to the redefinition of the English language and the overturning of cultural paradigms too often connected to a hegemonic point of view. This redefinition has taken on enhanced complexity with the advent of multiculturalism, the explosion of the canon, and the rich interpolation of experimental and traditional narrative strategies. Since the beginning of the millennium, American novelists have felt the urge to replenish language in order to create a counternarrative, to restore a creative heterogeneity against the one-way rhetoric of the terrorists and the one-way rhetoric of the government. Several American novelists different in age and background quickly turned the post-9/11 novel into a new subgenre.

This is the reason why words such as “tourist,” “terrorist,” “activist” are particularly significant in recent American fiction, because of their semantic ambivalence and the ways in which the meanings attached to them have gradually shifted during the last years. All three are figures of passage, trespassing both physical and metaphysical borders in very different ways. Especially after the terrorist attacks of 2001, their meaning has been revisited, expanded and complicated, if not overturned.

This essay focuses on the multifaceted figure of the protester – the activist – as it appears in two novels published respectively in 2003 and 2013 by two authors who are considered the deans of American postmodernism: *Cosmopolis* by Don DeLillo and *Bleeding Edge* by Thomas Pynchon. Both novels are powerful snapshots of turn-of-the-century America on the eve of the terrorist attacks of September 11; they

⁷ Daniel Kreps, “Stephen King, Cheryl Strayed Sign Open Letter Condemning Donald Trump,” *Rolling Stone*, 25 May 2016.

⁸ Stephen Elliott, “Terrorism,” in *Future Dictionary*, ed. Safran Foer *et al.*, 137.

are set in New York, a global, babelish, chaotic city over which a terrible event looms.

In their works, Pynchon and DeLillo have constantly reshaped the character of the activist as an ambivalent, therefore infinitely adaptable, trope of the postmodernist discourse. Whether the activist is presented as an anarchist (Pynchon's *Against the Day*, 2006), a terrorist and/or a writer (DeLillo's *Mao II*, 1991), a patriot (Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*, 1997), a street artist (DeLillo's *Falling Man*, 2007), a political protester (Pynchon's *Vineland*, 1990), a bored bourgeois (DeLillo's *Players*, 1977), an idealist hacker (Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge*), or simply a heckler, an annoying and quite inoffensive disturber (DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*), nonetheless it usually stands out as "author" of a plot, a counternarrative, often in competition with that of the author.

In DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*, published in 2003 but set in the year 2000, the degeneration of language has become an obsession. Eric Packer, the novel's protagonist, is a twenty-eight-year-old billionaire who travels through Manhattan in a stretch limousine; the whole novel takes place in a day, from sunrise to past midnight, and quite all the action takes place inside the limousine.

Eric is continuously frustrated by the inability of the English lexicon to keep pace with technological innovations. Everyday language fails to represent the multiform and always changing reality ruled by the totalizing capitalistic system. Words that not so long ago were linked with the idea of future technology now seem to him already anachronistic – words like skyscraper, automated teller machines, stethoscopes, even computer, airport – they seem "burdened by their own historical memory."⁹

DeLillo is perfectly aware that some words, in addition to being obsolete, anachronistic and cumbersome, can also be dangerous, even fatal: at the end of the novel, Eric succeeds with a ruse to make Torval, his bodyguard, pronounce the word that activates the futuristic gun the protagonist is pointing at him. In this way the bodyguard is killed by his own weapon, thanks to the password he has just uttered: the language, literally, can kill.

At some point, Eric finds himself in the middle of a street demonstration: "There were people approaching the car. Who were they? They were protesters, anarchists, whoever they were, a form of street theater, or adepts of sheer rampage",¹⁰ Eric immediately notices the performative aspect of the protest: the activists are performing a specific role in the stage of the city. He watches the protest from the screens of the

⁹ Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 54.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

cameras inside the car, while masked activists release rats in restaurants and hotels, crying “A SPECTER IS HAUNTING THE WORLD – THE SPECTER OF CAPITALISM.”¹¹ The narrator states that for Eric “it was exhilarating”:¹² “Even with the beatings and the gassings, the jolt of explosives, even in the assault of the investment bank, he thought there was something theatrical about the protest, ingratiating even.”¹³

While his car is being thumped, spray-painted and vandalized by the protesters, Eric thinks:

This is the free market itself. These people are a fantasy generated by the market. They don’t exist outside the market. There is nowhere they can go to be on the outside. There is no outside. [...] They are necessary to the system they despise. [...] This is why they exist, to invigorate and perpetuate the system.¹⁴

In fact, they are immediately reabsorbed into the system. Some pages later, Eric says: “We were under attack by anarchists. Just two hours ago they were a major global protest. Now, what, forgotten.”¹⁵

Yet there is another protest that deeply strikes Eric: “A man sat on the sidewalk with legs crossed, trembling in a length of braided flame.”¹⁶ A burning man. “What did this change? Everything, he thought. [...] The market was not total. It could not claim this man or assimilate his act.”¹⁷ Notwithstanding, one of Eric’s consultants tells him that it’s not original, it’s an appropriation of the famous protest made by the Vietnamese monk Thich Quang Duc. On the contrary, Eric regards the man’s suicide as a significant act, he thinks that the man killed himself “to say something. To make people think. [...] He did a serious thing. He took his life. Isn’t this what you have to do to show them that you’re serious?”¹⁸ We know that the novel is set in the year 2000, but this statement, read in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 2001, acquires an altogether different meaning. Does one have to kill him or herself to demonstrate that he or she is serious? And if so, does his or her protest become more rightful?

Later on, Eric meets another activist, André Petrescu, the so called “pastry assassin”: “a small guy with hair dyed glassy blond, in a Disney

¹¹ Ibid., 96.

¹² Ibid., 97.

¹³ Ibid., 99.

¹⁴ Ibid., 90.

¹⁵ Ibid., 118.

¹⁶ Ibid., 97.

¹⁷ Ibid., 99-100.

¹⁸ Ibid., 100.

World T-shirt [...] a man who stalked corporate directors, military commanders, soccer stars and politicians. He hit them in the face with pies.”¹⁹ He proudly states in his funny East-European accent:

I crèmed Fidel three times in six days when he is in Bucharest last year. I am action painter of crème pies. I drop from a tree on Michael Jordan one time. This is famous Flying Pie. It is museum quality video for the ages. I quiche Sultan of fucking Brunei in his bath. They put me in black hole until I am screaming from my eyes.²⁰

This rather comic activist is just the opposite of the man in flames: his protest is quite inoffensive, and altogether symbolic, and yet he was tortured because of it. Nonetheless, it is very difficult to take him seriously.

To sum up: the protesters who assaulted the bank and vandalized Eric’s car are considered performer artists, their protest a theatrical one, soon to be forgotten – part of the all-inclusive capitalist system they rebel against; the suicide activist who set himself on fire, though his act is striking and extremely serious, is not original – it has already been done. On the other hand, the man who throws pies against political figures is strikingly – and humorously – original, but Eric’s bodyguard considers him “a petty incursion. Technically irrelevant.”²¹ Even the final confrontation between Eric and the deranged man who has been stalking him to kill him is irrelevant, because Eric’s suicidal bent has been clear throughout the novel, and, in a sense, he wants to be killed.

What remains then? Is there still space for a serious, significant and effective protest? What is the effective role of the activist in the new Millennium? To answer this question, we need to recall that in 2011 *Time* magazine named “the protester” as Person of the Year. The article specifies that protesters “share a belief that their countries’ political systems and economies have grown dysfunctional and corrupt” and that “they used the Internet to find one another and take to the streets to insist on fairness and (in the Arab world) freedom.”²² Now we know that the Internet, cell phones, and technology in general, were also the means by which terrorists coordinated suicide attacks and killed hundreds of people in the world; they acted against the corruption of “Western” governments, and in the name of their own distorted concepts of “fairness” and

¹⁹ Ibid., 142.

²⁰ Ibid., 143.

²¹ Ibid., 144.

²² Kurt Andersen, “Cover Story. The Protester,” *Time*, 14 December 2011.

“freedom.” Probably, in the aftermath of the 2015 Paris attacks and the 2016 Nice attacks, *Time* magazine would not have published such an article.

Something has definitely changed in recent years. In *Bleeding Edge* (published in 2013), Pynchon represents the activists from a very different perspective. The plot of the book is too vast to sum it up here. Maxine Tarnow, the novel’s protagonist, a freelance fraud investigator, becomes involved with an alleged conspiracy revolving around a global tech company which may or may not be funding terrorists connected to the 9/11 attacks. However, Pynchon’s New York seems ever more dated than the city represented by DeLillo: it is an unreal, obsolete city, ready to be replaced by its virtual counterpart on the web.

If *Cosmopolis* is entirely structured around the idea of obsolescence, the very title of Pynchon’s novel, *Bleeding Edge*, refers to a technology that is so far ahead of its time that it doesn’t yet have any practical application, a technology so new that it can be useless, unreliable or even harmful. The novel’s irony is that this bleeding edge technology is represented by DeepArcher, a virtual environment very similar to “Second Life,” a software that in 2001 looked like the avant-garde of the future, but that today – or even in 2013 when Pynchon’s novel was published – is obsolete and practically forgotten.

In *Bleeding Edge* the counternarrative is proposed by March Kelleher, a leftist political activist who in her blog rants against the Bush administration, denounces real or alleged conspiracies related to 9/11, blames the language of media and the rhetoric of government – that is, the usual stuff the authors of the *Future Dictionary of America* protested against ten years before. But now it seems that this type of protest has become somehow tired, outdated, irrelevant, even tautological, a parody of the conspiracy theories on which Pynchon based his early fiction:

On her weblog, March Kelleher has wasted no time shifting into what she calls her old-lefty tirade mode. “Just to say evil Islamics did it, that’s so lame, and we know it. We see those official close-ups on the screen. The shifty liar’s look, the twelve-stepper’s gleam in the eye. One look at these faces and we know they’re guilty of the worst crimes we can imagine.”²³

On the other hand, in *Bleeding Edge* the true protest is brought about through the Internet by a new kind of activist: the hacker. In 2004,

²³ Thomas Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge* (New York: Penguin, 2013), 321.

McKenzie Wark published a book called *A Hacker Manifesto*, in which he described hacking as “a pure, free experimental activity.”²⁴ He writes:

Everywhere one hears rumors of the hacker as the new form of juvenile delinquent, or nihilist vandal, or servant of organized crime. Or, the hacker is presented as a mere harmless subculture, an obsessive garage pursuit with its restrictive styles of appearance and codes of conduct.²⁵

According to Wark: “The hacker class arises out of the transformation of information into property.”²⁶ “The interest of the hacker class lies first and foremost in a free circulation of information, this being the necessary condition for the renewed expression of the hack.”²⁷

This is part of the hacker ethic, according to which all information should be free. From this book, the hacker emerges as a new form of artist; but the things the hacker creates are “mortgaged to others, and to the interests of others, to states and corporations who monopolize their means.”²⁸

Bleeding Edge is full of hackers who follow an ethic code and create open source programs, where everyone can share his or her own contribution; there are “amateur hackers,”²⁹ “Hacker guerrillas,”³⁰ a “Civil Hackers’ School,”³¹ people even attend “an annual hackers’ convention.”³² In the book, set in 2001, the Internet is the new frontier, the only space of freedom and possibilities left outside the all-encompassing system.

But as a character states towards the end of the novel, in the aftermath of 9/11 attacks, Internet freedom is only an illusion:

It’s still unmessed-with country. You like to think it goes on forever, but the colonizers are coming. [...] Except summer will end all too soon, once they get down here, everything’ll be suburbanized faster than you can say “late capitalism.”³³

²⁴ McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 198.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁹ Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge*, 47.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 475.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 371.

³² *Ibid.*, 135.

³³ *Ibid.*, 241.

When Maxine states that “Nobody’s in control of the Internet,” her father, who in the Sixties was a political activist, replies:

You serious? Believe that while you still can, Sunshine. You know where it all comes from, this online paradise of yours? It started back during the Cold War, when the think tanks were full of geniuses plotting nuclear scenarios. [...] Your Internet, back then the Defense Department called it DARPA-net, the real original purpose was to assure survival of U.S. command and control after a nuclear exchange with the Soviets. [...] Yep, and your 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.³⁴

Now that the Internet has finally become the new cosmopolis, the new global market from which there is no outside; now that the most expert hackers are blackmailed and co-opted into that very same multinational corporations that they purported to attack, while the more honest among them are doomed to the role of nostalgic and naïve nerds, already overcome by history, can there still be a space for a significant protest?

Pynchon’s novel shows that activism is still possible – under the guise of “hacktivism”: the subversive use of computer networks in an effort to convey a social or political message. Opponents argue that hacktivism is a crime and causes damage, while others insist that it is the equivalent of a protest and is therefore protected, as a form of free speech. Undoubtedly, as we have seen, the new technologies facilitate various forms of protest, both as a means used by protesters to contact and coordinate on a global scale, and because they immediately convey a huge amount of information and messages.

In *Bleeding Edge* Pynchon shows both sides of the hacker figure, a Romantic, naïve outlaw fighting for freedom, and the unscrupulous criminal working for tech companies. In quite the same way, in our real life we still struggle to frame figures such as Julian Assange, the editor-in-chief of the organization “WikiLeaks,” which he founded in 2006; Edward Snowden, the computer professional and CIA employee who leaked classified information in 2013; or the members of the international network of hacktivists known as “Anonymous,” who adopt Guy Fawkes masks as symbol of a decentralized online community engaged in collaborative hacktivism.

³⁴ Ibid., 419-20.

The narrator in *Bleeding Edge* is convinced that: “Could be there’s enough good hackers around interested in fighting back. Outlaws who’ll work for free, show no mercy for anybody who tries to use the Net for evil purposes.”³⁵ Nonetheless, one has to admit that even the system of open sourcing, a democratic way for each user to share and contribute ideas, has become a way of access for evildoers: “Anybody is likely to be wandering around the site, herds of tourist-idle, cop-curious [...], ROM hackers, homebrewers, RPG heretics, continually unwriting and overwriting.”³⁶ Even this new and potentially subversive counternarrative is already becoming inoffensive, irrelevant: “Every day more lusers than users, keyboards and screens turning into nothing but portals to Web sites for what the Management wants everybody addicted to, shopping, gaming, jerking off, streaming endless garbage.”³⁷

Is this really the future of the Internet and the hacktivist movements? Maybe, as Pynchon and DeLillo think, every protest is already part of the system, soon to become obsolete, just like the language used by activists, terrorists, politicians, novelists. The edge of the future is always bleeding. The specter of capitalism haunts the world’s cosmopolis and there is absolutely nothing we can do about it. Terrorists and evildoers are more incisive than writers, or non-violent activists. But luckily enough, there will always be some counterforce ready to step in and create a counternarrative, people who challenge the edge, cross the boundaries and renew their protests, their language.

And as the writers who compiled *The Future Dictionary of America* knew all too well, “Language remains an essential element of modern life: those who ignore its importance, who view it as a curiosity, relegated to the past [...], simply persist in living in ignorance.”³⁸ Indeed, DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis* and Pynchon’s *Bleeding Edge* are two successful attempts to fill in a non-violent way the empty space left by the terrorism of meaninglessness.

³⁵ Ibid., 432.

³⁶ Ibid., 426.

³⁷ Ibid., 432.

³⁸ Safran Foer *et al.*, *The Future Dictionary*, IX.

AMERICAN LITERARY ART AND POLITICAL THEORY: THE CASE OF THOMAS PYNCHON

GEORGE SHULMAN

My goal in this essay is to relate the political and aesthetic dimensions of American literary art. I do so by focusing on narrative and fictionality, first in American politics, then in the broad genre characteristics of our literary canon, and finally in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Vineland*.

Begin with the relationship between the fictive and real in politics. In 1966, the year of Pynchon's *Lot 49*, the *New York Times* editorialized about the election for California governor: "On November 8, Californians will, we trust, understand where reality ends and fantasy begins," and not elect Ronald Reagan. But as his ongoing electoral success indicates, this distinction between reality and fantasy is neither obvious nor secure, and much social theory concurs. Pynchon wrote *Vineland* in 1990, but he set it in 1984, when Reagan announced "morning in America" while holding an MX missile in one hand and a budget axe in the other. Reagan thereby repeated the key tropes of American political culture: by joining pastoral images of an ideal America to paranoid images of monstrous threats, he invested regenerative meaning in violence; he redeemed an idealized America by demonizing the evil empire and its Sandinista puppets as well as its domestic echo, a despotic New Deal state and its corrupt dependents. Linking counter-insurgency warfare against those he called terrorists to "culture war" at home against racial others he called aliens and criminals, his rhetoric rejuvenated the pastoral systole and violent diastole that rhythmically energize the beating heart of American politics. I begin with Reagan to situate Pynchon's art but also to evoke Donald Trump: Reagan's genial grin disavowed his violence, whereas Trump embraces a violence he promises will reclaim our lost greatness, but both bespeak the organizing fantasy of national romance, a fiction made real.

Given the fantastical character of American political rhetoric, its shocking abstraction from the embodied complexity of social reality, it is

tempting to evoke the real against the fictive. Then we would join those like Richard Hofstadter, who was analyzing Reagan and the new right in the early 60s when he theorized “the paranoid style”¹ in contrast to rational bargaining by experts and elites. But joining Hofstadter is a mistake. Why? First, by finding paranoia only on the margins of American politics, he protected paranoia about anti-communism (now terrorism) and white supremacy, a bipartisan consensus that long unified the nation. Second, by presuming that the real is self-evident and that experts and elites inhabit it -while irrational populists, prophets, or con-men inhabit a lunatic fringe- he made “realism” the genre for politics properly understood, as negotiation over resources and power by rational elite actors. Hillary Clinton extended this realist aesthetic, by assuming that the problem in politics is merely ignorance of the facts, to remedy with truth-telling, and by assuming that “politics” is merely assembling coalitions serving self-evident groups and interests.

What is wrong with this approach? Surely, this ostensible realism forecloses on the aesthetic and generative aspects of the political. On the one hand, we develop a sense of reality, and make claims about our real circumstances, only through fantasy or fiction in their broadly visionary, say mytho-poetic sense. Conversely, we disturb a hegemonic sense of reality, a “partition of the sensible”² to invoke Jacques Ranciere, not by offering new facts to remedy ignorance, but by conjuring counter-visions that make some aspects of reality newly visible or that reconfigure the significance of what we already know or count as real. If we simply defend the real against the fictive, we end up serving hegemony, what Ranciere calls the police rather than what he calls politics. On the other hand, if the paradox of politics is that we project what does not exist yet as a referent -a part with no part, a transformed people, a possible future- then we need to credit fantasy, as it were, before the referent. Political action is generative only if it mobilizes fantasy, to insist on the contingency of what is, and create unexpected, alternate realities.³

¹ Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” *Harper’s Magazine*, November 1964.

² Jacques Ranciere, “The Distribution of the Sensible,” in *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Bloomsbury Academic 2006).

³ For example, after the 2012 election, Frank Rich indicted the Republican Party for living in (and being defeated by) willful denial of reality, whereas Hannah Arendt began her essay about the Pentagon Papers, “Lying in Politics,” by arguing that “denial of reality” is a condition of political action, which must assume the contingency of the world it enters and would change. The famous Carl Rove statement that “we create the realities that you [in the reality-community] only write about,” which dismisses simple referentiality, is Rich’s evidence of