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Freeways and Fog: The Shift in Attitude between Postmodernism and Post-Postmodernism from *The Crying of Lot 49* to *Inherent Vice*

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ABSTRACT

Postmodernism has been declared dead and gone many times over the last forty years, but you would not necessarily be able to see it if you flipped through many contemporary novels. Although many of these books still look postmodernist on the page, there has been a change in attitude. In order to examine this change, this essay looks at the subtle differences between two of Pynchon's detective novels: *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Inherent Vice*. While postmodernist notions of interconnectedness carried a negative valance—manifested as conspiracies often leading to death—post-postmodernism views interconnection in a positive and hopeful way. Ultimately, the key distinction is in the way that each novel handles the idea that narrative can convey knowledge.

KEYWORDS

Detective fiction; narrative; postmodernism; post-postmodernism; Pynchon

Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Inherent Vice*, written at opposite ends of his career, beg for comparison: they both feature detective story structures, land developers, deliberately faulty imitation of U.S. government documents, conspiracy, paranoia, parody, and unresolved plots. Despite all that they have in common, *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Inherent Vice* feel very different, especially at each novel's end: Oedipa drives the freeways drunk trying to get into an accident and is left questioning her sanity at the auction house, while Doc Sportello, at the end of *Inherent Vice*, is following a line of taillights as he drives through a blinding fog, his connection to other motorists offering him a provisional kind of safety. The evolution of Pynchon is a useful lens through which to view the evolution of postmodernism, and it can, I think, help us to see how many contemporary novels—what we might call post-postmodern[1] novels—differ from postmodern novels. While *Inherent Vice* holds on to postmodernism's suspicions about our ability to *know* anything, it seems to have a different attitude about human interconnectedness; the mantra of much of postmodernism seems to be in line with Jack Gladney's assertion in DeLillo's *White Noise* that "all plots tend to move deathward" (26), but in *Inherent Vice* we see Pynchon move away from this pessimism and, instead, move toward the idea that interconnectedness is the only hope we have in a world obscured by fog.

It is hard to find total agreement on just about any aspect of postmodernism, including if *The Crying of Lot 49* is an example of it. Brian McHale argued in *Postmodernist Fiction* that *The Crying of Lot 49* was not postmodernist because of its detective story structure, which led him to conclude that, though it asked many ontological questions, *The Crying of Lot 49* ultimately had an epistemological dominant and therefore was late modernist or limit modernist instead (9, 22–24). While the mode of the novel is certainly epistemological, it ends on a note of such deep ontological uncertainty (are we in a world where the Tristero exists?) that I think that by McHale's own measure it is postmodernist, and it is the detective story structure itself that opens space for the deepest uncertainties. Many postmodern theorists have written about *The Crying of Lot 49* as a postmodern novel. Richard Wasson identified Pynchon as an exemplary writer of postmodernism before the term

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"postmodernism" was in use in a 1969 article in the *Partisan Review* (Bertens 33). Since then, numerous postmodern theorists—Stephen Best, Douglas Kellner, Perry Anderson, and Linda Hutcheon—have dedicated portions of their works to Pynchon. In an essay on *The Crying of Lot 49* in *Twentieth Century Literature*, Rachel Adams claimed that "Thomas Pynchon may be the most frequently cited author in the vast scholarship on literary postmodernism" (252). As a starting point, it is fairly safe to call *The Crying of Lot 49* postmodern.

Inherent Vice is even trickier to connect to a movement. Simon de Bourcier wonders, "If we insist that the Pynchon of *Against the Day, Inherent Vice* and *Bleeding Edge* is still a postmodernist […] are we willfully ignoring new themes and formal innovations in Pynchon's later work[?]" (2). Many have considered postmodernism long gone by the time *Inherent Vice* was published in 2009, but we do not have a consensus on when it died or what has replaced it. We cannot even be completely sure that it is over; many novels still look postmodern in terms of their presentation. Furthermore, many view Pynchon as not quite in tune with contemporary fiction. There is always a certain Pynchonesque quality to his novels—Sarah Churchwell, who reviewed *Inherent Vice* in the *Observer*, notes his use of pastiche, his "piling up of incident and jokes," his "comic setpieces and hallucinatory discourses" and his "embedded puzzles" as examples of his unique style. Yet this book does have a lot in common with a large subset of contemporary novels. First, there are many contemporary literary novels that have taken up the detective form to ask epistemological questions as Pynchon does: Jonathan Lethem's *Motherless Brooklyn*, Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policeman's Union*, Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*, Graham Swift's *The Light of Day*, and Martin Amis's *Night Train*, to name a few. Even Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* uses a detective story structure, with a nine-year-old boy as the detective. Contemporary novels are full of the sort of "comic setpieces" Churchwell notes. Take, for example, the fumblings of the accidental arsonist in Brock Clarke's *An Arsonist's Guide to Writers' Homes in New England*. Contemporary novels are also full of puzzles—in addition to the books mentioned above, Tom McCarthy's Booker-Prize-shortlisted *C* contains numerous puzzles that have garnered him much comparison to Pynchon.[2] Louis Menand, in his review of *Inherent Vice* in the *New Yorker*, writes that "'Inherent Vice' does not appear to be a Pynchon palimpsest of semi-obscure allusions. (I could be missing something, of course. I could be missing everything)" (74). Menand writes (without too much confidence) that something is different here from Pynchon's previous work.

There is no doubt that something has changed between *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Inherent Vice*, and I think this change is representative of a large subset of novels that are trying to work past postmodernism without dismissing its theoretical arguments. In both *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Inherent Vice* the connections and plots are tenuous, but in *The Crying of Lot 49* they are nearly always ominous, while in *Inherent Vice* our happy-go-lucky detective stumbles stoned through coincidences that help him get closer to solving his case. This mirrors the change in the attitude of many examples of contemporary literary fiction: postmodernism declared that most of what we have thought of as knowledge was socially constructed and is not connected to any sort of absolute truth. Many contemporary writers have internalized this message, and, rather than reject it or despair of it, they are writing novels that acknowledge our lack of epistemological certainties but try to find knowledge in the form of connections and mutual understanding. Irmtraud Huber is one of a small group of theorists who sees this "yes, and" movement as a way that writers are working past postmodernism without outright rejecting it. In *Literature after Postmodernism* she argues that "the new kind of realism does not revoke postmodernist claims about the power of discourse and the inaccessibility of the real, about the fragmentation of the subject and the impossibility of truth. Instead, it acknowledges them even while it asserts itself in spite of them" (6).[3] While *Inherent Vice* holds on to much of its postmodernist doubt, it also finds a way to assert a positive message about the potential for narrative to produce meaning. A story is a network of connections, plots are systems of cause and effect—things that Pynchon has spent much of his career warning us against. This change of attitude can be seen in the way that postmodernist and post-postmodernist novels handle the relationship between narrative and

knowledge. Essentially, many contemporary writers are asking us to believe in narratives while also maintaining the postmodernist idea that narratives are false, human-made constructions.

The epistemology of narrative is at the forefront in *Inherent Vice* since, as a detective novel, it focuses on constructing a narrative in order to explain a crime. In an essay on Sherlock Holmes, Michael Chabon looks to Conan Doyle's personal life to explain the genesis of the detective novel: "Conan Doyle got a decisive demonstration of how his father's way of reading the world could be combined with his mother's gift for telling a story" (42) at medical school when Dr. Joseph Bell taught his students how to read a patient. Conan Doyle's father's view of the world made it, "against all reason, cohere" (39). The detective novel uses narrative to make the world cohere; it picks up fragments and assembles them into a narrative governed by cause and effect, means and motive. Detective novels are usually such a pleasure because they make the world make sense, but *Inherent Vice* isn't so simple. Rachel Adams says that "*The Crying of Lot 49* is structured like a frustrated detective story in which too many clues pile up" (252). *Inherent Vice* is another "frustrated detective story." It also has too many clues and feels, at times, impenetrable. But it also has a different resolution and a different feeling at the end. We don't feel entrapped in a "postmodern labyrinth" (Adams 252): many of the bad guys are arrested, and the missing characters all reappear. We may not know the whole truth behind the Golden Fang, but it doesn't feel quite as menacing as the Tristero does; rather, it gently floats on the horizon of our awareness like the eponymous boat. Menand writes that "plotwise, there are probably too many pieces of the puzzle to hold in your head, and it's not completely clear where, or whether, every piece fits. But that, too, is standard business procedure in the form" (74). To Menand, we do not have radical postmodern uncertainty at the end of *Inherent Vice*—we have standard, detective-novel uncertainty. "Chandler's […] own plots could be pretty far-fetched" (74–75), he reminds us.

Postmodern Pynchon and Post-Postmodern Pynchon

Detective fiction depends on narrative, but postmodernist fiction is often viewed as anti-narrative. Jean-Francois Lyotard famously defined the "postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives" or an unwillingness to believe in the stories that, for us, hold the world together, that legitimate knowledge. "The narrative function is losing its functors," he writes, "its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal" (xxiv). This idea is often expressed as a distrust of any narrative that seeks to explain. This seems to be exactly what *The Crying of Lot 49* is about: Oedipa Maas, as executrix, is checking on the assets of the Inverarity estate, but what she is really trying to do is to figure out the story of Inverarity's death and the relation it might have to his stamp collection. Oedipa's attempts are continually frustrated. As Bernard Duyfhuizen argues, "the set of signs that comes together for Oedipa cannot be exchanged in the medium of 'story' because variability and indeterminacy have replaced the older models of narrative transmission that once served to order our world" ("Hushing" 93). In other words, to rephrase this in Lyotard's terms, our metanarratives have been replaced by variability and indeterminacy. Duyfhuizen adds, "we come to discover […] that neither source nor destination are finite and that the messages transmitted refuse to resolve into a single meaning; instead, the messages disseminate fragments of meaning across a culture that has lost any totalizing mythology" ("Hushing" 81), or, in Lyotard's terms, a culture that has lost its metanarratives. Duyfhuizen tells us that "ultimately, Oedipa comes to embody the postmodern condition of information overload—like a reader of postmodern fiction (Pynchon's own novels, for example), Oedipa cannot keep all of the fragments together in one totalized story" ("Hushing" 88). So *The Crying of Lot 49* also puts forward a metanarrative about the inability of stories to convey knowledge.

In the afterword to *The Postmodern Condition* Lyotard tells us that:

> The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share

> collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable. (81)

The Crying of Lot 49 does just this: Thomas Schaub argues that "Pynchon seeks a form of expression that conforms to the lack of formal certainties in the world he is describing. This underlies the primary effect of Pynchon's writing. The reader experiences Pynchon's fiction as representative of a determinate order which it suggests but persistently withholds" (3). The act of suggesting but withholding gives us the "stronger sense of the unpresentable" that Lyotard notes. Schaub adds, "This quality—this impenetrableness—is intensified by the ways in which Pynchon encourages the reader to suspect that this withheld order is so withheld only by remaining unnamed; that a revelatory unity is present in the text, but without confirmation or recognition" (3–4). If *The Crying of Lot 49* is a detective novel, taking up this form encourages the reader to look for clues along with the detective figure, to try to solve the mystery, and it intensifies our sense of the unpresentable since, ultimately, the mystery has no solution, and we have almost no certainties.

The lack of certainties makes Oedipa suicidal: she is driven to driving drunk on the freeways hoping for death. Much postmodernist metafiction seems committed to reminding us of the danger of creating stories. In 1980 Linda Hutcheon wrote: "the modern, ambiguous, open-ended novel might suggest […] less an obvious new insecurity or lack of coincidence between man's need for order and his actual experience of the chaos of the contingent world, than a certain curiosity about art's ability to produce 'real' order" (*Narcissistic* 19). Raymond Federman would have called this sort of writing "surfiction." Surfiction, he writes, does not imitate reality, but "exposes the fictionality of reality" (7). That is, it exposes the extent to which fiction, narrative form, influences how we interpret the events around us in our own lives. "Reality as such does not exist" he writes, "or rather only exists in its fictional version" (8). Many postmodernist novels figure this imposed order as a dangerous delusion. Nabokov's novels, which were an inspiration to Pynchon, also carry this message: it is with Humbert's solipsistic view of the world and his beautiful writing that he is nearly able to justify the repeated rapes of Dolores to himself in *Lolita*; in *Pale Fire* we see the cracks in Charles Kinbote's scholarly veneer from the foreword, and by the end we see how dangerous his delusion is. In each of these examples of metafiction, creating stories is deadly: story-making is a symptom of insanity for Kinbote, it allows Humbert to delude himself, and, in Oedipa's case, the unfulfilled desire for a coherent story causes her to become suicidal. These novels show us the danger of using narrative as a mode of knowledge.

Hutcheon writes that "Totalizing narrative representation has […] been considered by some critics as the defining characteristic of the novel as a genre, ever since the beginnings in the overt controlling and ordering (and fictionalizing) or Cervantes and Sterne," and points out that in postmodernist discourse there is a "paradoxical desire for and suspicion of totalization" (*Politics* 60), and postmodernist fiction both "inscribes and subverts" this desire.

The notion that postmodernism "inscribes and subverts" is central to Hutcheon's understanding of postmodernism. She argues that the primary move that postmodern literature makes is to subvert cultural meanings, but to do that it must first show them, and in this way postmodernism inscribes these meanings before it subverts them (*Politics* 1). *The Crying of Lot 49*, as a detective novel that asks its readers to look for clues, inscribes our desire to find meanings through narrative, and then subverts that desire by cutting off the possibility of a solution.

Inherent Vice has a different stance on metanarratives and sees different possibilities for their use. As Hutcheon notes "man's need for order" in the passage I quoted above, many contemporary novels assert that narrative can fulfill this need, even while holding on to the notion that stories are human-made constructions. Like *The Crying of Lot 49, Inherent Vice* does suggest and withhold a complete understanding of the world, but it does not suggest that all meaning is impossible, as *The Crying of Lot 49* seems to suggest—it just suggests it is impossible for Doc. Our search is again cut off and our ability to know is limited, but it is not quite *as* limited as it is in *The Crying of Lot 49*. At the end of *Inherent Vice* many of the missing people have returned—Mickey Wolfmann is alive, Shasta

and Coy Harlingen have returned to their old lives—and we know all the pieces of the puzzle that they bring to the table. Final coherence is still denied us—just as we never learn the true nature of the Tristero, we never know what the Golden Fang really is. Yet we do have several plausible explanations of its purpose: a group that both sells drugs and runs recovery centers, or a group that makes fake Nixon-faced currency, among others. We know for sure that in the world of the novel it exists: there is undeniable proof in both its boat and in its giant gold-plated canine-shaped headquarters. We can't say nearly as much for the Tristero. When Mike Fallopian suggests Oedipa to make a list of her solid evidence, she cannot do it (*Crying* 138), a task that would be simple for Doc (if, of course, he could remember his evidence).

Patrick O'Donnell writes in his introduction to *New Essays on The Crying of Lot 49* that the novel "is, conceivably, a quest without end, an inquiry into and dramatization of our incessant desire for meaning, our will to generate signs and significance wherever we plant our feet" (13), a desire that is, of course, undercut by the novel, which staunchly, flatly, refuses to cohere. Oedipa feels that "a revelation trembled just past the threshold of her understanding" (*Crying* 14). Doc gets much closer to the truth than Oedipa ever does. *Inherent Vice* is narrated in the third person by a narrator whose perspective is very closely connected to Doc, and at times it seems that the thing that is preventing us from getting a full revelation in *Inherent Vice* is the threshold of Doc's drug-addled understanding. Our search for meaning is still subverted, but while meaning seems to be impossible in *The Crying of Lot 49*, it seems that it is potentially possible to find meaning in the world of *Inherent Vice*. This novel still "inscribes and subverts," but complete and sharp subversion isn't the *necessary* outcome; it still makes the postmodern move, but it is more gentle in its assertion, and narratives seem potentially useful.

We are held to Doc's point of view much more closely than we are to Oedipa's. Take the opening of the fourth chapter of *Inherent Vice*: "On certain days, driving into Santa Monica was like having hallucinations without going to all the trouble of acquiring and then taking a particular drug, although some days, for sure, *any* drug was preferable to driving into Santa Monica" (*Inherent* 50). These words, while given to us by the third-person narrator of the novel, sound as though they are coming directly from Doc, not only because he compares the city to being on drugs but also in the italicized "any." Doc's quoted words are often italicized to give us that particular stoner emphasis (captured so well by Joaquin Phoenix in the film version), and here we can almost hear the emphasis in Doc's voice as if he were speaking to us rather than the narrator.

I view this narratorial flourish as an example that the novel is narrated in a very close type of free indirect discourse, speech that is "freed of its authorial flagging" in which "The narrative seems to float away from the novelist [or narrator] and take on the properties of the character, who now seems to 'own' the words" (9), as James Wood explains in *How Fiction Works*.[4] Detective novels generally give us what the detective has seen, but not necessarily all of his thoughts. (This is an important feature of detective fiction and one of its primary pleasures: it is what allows readers to try to figure out the ending before it is revealed.) Here, we are not getting what Doc has seen, but what Doc has understood—an important distinction, given how much marijuana Doc smokes and how frequently he is knocked unconscious (three times in the first thirty pages of the novel). He is sometimes unsure if what he is seeing is real, and the narrator never clears it up for us. For example, in chapter thirteen, there are two examples of Doc being unsure if he has actually said what he said. Consider the following lines: "'Hi, Bigfoot! Been out smoking any niggers lately?' No…no, he was pretty sure what he'd said out loud was, 'Anything new on that Bel Air case?'" (*Inherent* 207). Doc isn't sure if he taunted Bigfoot for his racist practices or just asked him a straightforward question, and the narrator can't (or won't) clear it up for us. A few pages later Doc insults Bigfoot's mother, and the narrator writes, "Had Doc really said that or only thought it? He waited for Bigfoot to take offense" (*Inherent* 212). Initially, it seems as though the narrator isn't sure, but the second sentence makes it clear that it is Doc's own uncertainty we are hearing. Duyfhuizen, in a review of *Inherent Vice*, notes this restricted perspective and argues that if there was a traditionally separate narrator it would have "made it harder to maintain the moral ambiguity of the text" ("God"). It also would have

prevented Pynchon from locating the epistemological ambiguity in Doc's perspective. By holding the reader to such a close third-person perspective, the reader's understanding is limited to the things that Doc understands.

The limits of Doc's vision are thematically linked to the recurring symbol of fog in the novel. Fog is something that obscures our perception of the world, but it doesn't fundamentally change the world. All told, there are seven mentions of fog (3, 50, 86, 177, 206, 315, 367–69), and this symbol seems to imply a difference in philosophy from *The Crying of Lot 49*. Meaning was not possible for Oedipa because the world would not allow it—there is too much ambiguity. Meaning for Doc is obscured by drugs and fog—the fog being a symbol for the limits of vision, a type of temporary, conditional, and shifting constraint. Oedipa knows that she will learn nothing at the auction, but Doc only has to go back to the giant gold, tooth-shaped building and continue to investigate to learn more. There might not be a solution to *Inherent Vice*'s mystery, but the problems facing Doc are practical, organizational, and social rather than metaphysical. It seems possible, in Doc's world, to tell a story that will solve the mystery (even if he can't).

But the fact that the story doesn't come together is important. Our search for meaning is still inscribed by the form and subverted by the outcome of the novel. While *The Crying of Lot 49* is like a detective novel, *Inherent Vice* is a detective novel, and it stays true to the conventions of the genre right from the outset when we have a beautiful woman appearing at the detective's office asking him to find a missing man. In this way, *Inherent Vice* works even harder to inscribe the meanings it will subvert than *The Crying of Lot 49* does. The postmodernist theoretical position—that narrative-based knowledge is a provisional human construction—still applies, but this novel also shows us that narrative can be used to a positive effect despite that fact.

Even though narrative can be productive in the search for knowledge, we still have uncertainty at the end of the novel. The title is about the difficulty of interpretation:

> it was as if whatever happened had reached some kind of limit. It was like finding the gateway to the past unguarded, unforbidden because it didn't have to be. Built into the act of return finally was this glittering mosaic of doubt. Something like what Sauncho's colleagues in marine insurance like to call inherent vice. (*Inherent* 351)

We learn that the term "inherent vice" is marine-insurance speak for what is uninsurable: as Sauncho explains, you can't insure eggs against breaking because breaking is an inherent vice of eggs—it is just what they naturally tend to do. As this passage is given to us, Doc is looking through binoculars, not able to make any more sense out of what he is seeing. The passage poses both a limit to his vision and a limit to interpretation: the gateway to the past is unguarded because it is in the nature of the world to be too complex for a simple interpretation by a single person. Resisting interpretation is the world's inherent vice. But in this example the way the world resists interpretation is not as evil as it seems to be in *The Crying of Lot 49*. Instead, doubt is a "glittering mosaic," it is something strange and complex and even beautiful. The world is a work of art that we can interpret but that we will not know for certain—that we will always doubt. As Doc is looking through his binoculars, his vision is limited to a small area, in the same way that his drug use limits his vision. Doc's last name, Sportello, can mean both "window" and "cage" in Italian—he is both the means and the limit of interpretation. Other people know other pieces to the puzzle, but Doc can't pull it together. We have a softened version of the message in *The Crying of Lot 49*: interpretation is resisted, doubt is always present, but making narrative connections is a worthwhile project, rather than something that leads to insanity.

The Epistemological Value of Narrative in the Post-Postmodernist Novel

There are a number of contemporary novels that seem to argue that narrative has value for some kinds of knowledge in some situations. Take, for example, Ian McEwan's *Atonement*. In this novel we are given an end to the story before being told that that ending was a lie, and then being given the

so-called real ending (within an already fictional novel). But after we are told the true story, we are asked to believe the false one because it does some useful work: according to the (fictional) writer, it gives us "hope" and "satisfaction" (350).[5] A number of contemporary novelists find various ways to alert us that they cannot tell the true or complete story, but then tell their stories anyway, justifying their existence by pointing to the things that narrative can give us, such as hope and satisfaction, or empathy. While a narrative might not be able to give us a complete understanding of a situation, it can help us to have an understanding of one person's perspective of a situation. These novelists hold on to postmodernist assumptions about the problems of narrative as a mode of knowledge, but instead of focusing on the limits, they choose to tell stories anyway, despite ambiguity and unknowability and all the other notions that made postmodernist fiction negatively oriented. These novelists tell stories despite the postmodernist assertion that stories are not true, while still embracing that assertion. Instead of taking the negatively oriented arguments of postmodernism to their logical limit, an important subset of contemporary novelists have gone the opposite way. They order the world for us, acknowledge the artificial nature of that ordering, and discuss the power and usefulness of a narrative that we know is false. We have a novel that celebrates the novel, and tells us why we should read it.

In his 2001 book *Hicks, Tribes, and Dirty Realists* Robert Rebein writes that postmodernists, based on their theoretical position, saw themselves as "the Last Writers. Anything after or beyond postmodernism was by definition impossible—as difficult to imagine as an end to the Cold War" (2). It is particularly difficult to move past postmodernism because

> Insofar as metafiction was a response to a supposedly naïve view of language and reality, isn't the abandonment of self conscious narration in our time a doomed and retrograde attempt to return to the days of unproblematic mimesis? To put the matter another way, isn't the writer of such neorealist fare pretending, in essence, that poststructuralist theory never happened? (17)

Rebein reminds us that in working past postmodernism we have to be careful to avoid a sort of regression. He asks, "do we simply accept the mimetic limitations of realism, as Robert Stone [editor of 1992's *Best American Short Stories*] suggests today's writers have, as obvious and move on from there to build what Tom Wolfe insists will be a bigger, better realism?" (19). While Rebein focuses on examples of fiction that seem to have implicitly accepted these premises—such as genre fiction and the extreme minimalism of the eighties—many contemporary novels seem to still be negotiating the terms of this acceptance of postmodernist presuppositions in their fictional work. Nicoline Timmer, in *Do You Feel It Too?* argues that "we are now perhaps at a time and place wherein a postmodern perspective on the subject or self is more or less accepted and it started to function as a cultural norm" (15) and that contemporary writers are trying to break through this norm: "quite simply put, it is not unthinkable that after endless proposals for *de*constructions, a desire to *construct* will breakthrough" (21). I think that this desire to construct is beginning to break through in the recent work of Pynchon.

For example, Adam Kelly, in "Moments of Decision" in this journal, writes about the problem depicting the actions of an inscrutable character in recent observer-hero narratives. He argues that "what these novels dramatize most powerfully in the struggles of the narrator to comprehend the hero's decision is a contemporary (one might even say post-theoretical) awareness of the impossibility of mastery: mastery not only of the truth of the event, but the means of representation of that truth" ("Moments" 326). That is, these novels are aware that they are unable to tell a true story, complete with cause and effect. While Kelly does not see these novels as "clear examples of post-postmodernist texts" because they "still cleave to an attempt to directly represent the moment of decision" ("Moments" 328), I do think that they represent a post-postmodernist change in attitude in that they find value in telling stories they cannot know.

Kelly uses the example of the unknowability of the girls' suicides in Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides* as an example. This novel is notable for its unique narration. It is narrated by an unnamed group of men who were obsessed with the Lisbon sisters as adolescents and who are now, as adults,

obsessed with figuring out the story behind their suicides. While the reason is ultimately unknowable, constructing the story is "a project that causes them incidentally to construct a history of their own adolescent selves" (Shostak 808), and it helps them understand the nature of knowledge. In this way the novel makes both an epistemological argument and an ethical argument: while stories cannot tell the truth of an event, they are still a viable and important way to *know*, and we must tell them, because, although they are faulty tools, they are essential for understanding. In this case, it helps the narrators understand themselves. While the story is unsettling, Debra Shostak notes that the narrators "find succor in the mythic" story they have created (825).

Eugenides's follow-up, *Middlesex*, features a narrator who tells a story he admits he cannot know, but it helps him have a clearer understanding of who he is. Cal is obsessed with his family history as a way to explain the genetic mutation that caused him to be born intersex. In order to tell the story of the gene that was passed down to him, he narrates hundreds of pages of scenes that he was not present for and must be imaginatively recreating.[6]

Cal comments playfully on what he can and cannot know throughout the text, especially the early portions of the book. When Cal discusses his father's interest in scientific methods to make sure their next child was a girl, he writes, "Of course, a narrator in my position (prefetal at the time) can't be entirely sure about any of this. I can only explain the scientific mania that overtook my father during the spring of '59 as a symptom of the belief in progress that was quietly infecting everyone back then" (*Middlesex* 9). His assumptions have been based on the spirit of the era. His mother might have told him some of this, but he pulls the details out of his assumptions about what people at that time were like in general. He writes that "In that optimistic, post-war America […] everybody was the master of his own destiny, so it only followed that my father would be the master of his" (9–10). A few pages later, as his parents go to bed to create him, Cal breaks off his narrative, saying "A child's natural decorum make me refrain from imagining the scene in much detail" (16). The word "imagining," of course, makes plain what he has been doing all along.

At the time of the narration Cal is attempting to date a woman, but he is considering breaking it off because he does not know how to explain his condition to her. He doesn't really know how to explain it to himself. Writing the story is helping him come to terms with it. Since running away from Dr. Luce (a doctor who wanted to do surgery on Cal so that he could stay a woman many years earlier), he has avoided doctors completely. When Dr. Luce asked Cal (as a teenager) to write about himself, in order to figure out if it would be best for Cal to live as a woman or as a man, Cal writes that "on that Smith Corona I quickly discovered that telling the truth wasn't nearly as fun as making things up" (*Middlesex* 418), and it seems that Cal is still making things up as a way to find his identity. Making up a story that he can't quite know helps Cal understand himself, making this both an epistemologically and ethically important move: within the novel it gives Cal a way to understand himself when conventional methods are not available, and it also makes an argument about the value and necessity of stories to help us understand ourselves and others. This is the kind of thing that only narrative can do, this is its great strength: it can help us make connections when all the facts are not available.

Despite admittedly telling a story that its narrator cannot know—or perhaps because of it—*Middlesex* is an example of the New Sincerity in contemporary literature. Kelly notes that David Foster Wallace was at the forefront of this shift. He writes:

> That Wallace from early on characterized his artistic project as a response to the contemporary prevalence of irony in American literature is well established […] from *Infinite Jest* onward it became primarily about returning to literary narrative a concern with sincerity not seen since modernism shifted the ground so fundamentally almost a century before. ("New" 133)

But this return to sincerity does not, as Rebein warns, mean a return to an unproblematic mimesis. Kelly adds that "For Wallace, any return to sincerity must be informed by a study of postmodernist fiction" ("New" 134). In my view, *Middlesex* achieves this by remembering the postmodernist incredulity of the epistemological value of stories by reminding us when our narrator cannot

know the things he is narrating, but it works toward sincerity by using narrative to construct truths that are necessary to the characters. Storytelling is allowed a practical function. *Inherent Vice* balances the unknowability of the world with an emerging belief in the productive power of connections and stories. In this case it is used to try to solve crimes, but in a larger sense it represents a gradually returning belief in the ability of stories to explain how the world works.

A look at recent Booker Prize winners and short-listed novels (as a way to limit what could be a large field) can show us just how prominent this kind of thinking is in contemporary fiction. Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* features a character who spends the novel thinking about how the stories he has told about himself have brought him comfort despite their inaccuracy; Karen Joy Fowler's *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* features a narrator who deliberately manipulates the story so that the audience views her family life in a way that she sees as more authentic even though it is untrue; Ali Smith's *How to Be Both* announces it is impossible to tell the story of a painter who has been lost to history before promptly telling it in the second half of the book; Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* features a story that rewrites itself; and Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* tells both a true and allegorical version of a set of events and asks us to believe the allegorical one. All these examples make a claim about the productive power of narrative when the facts are not enough. While *Inherent Vice* does not make overt claims about the value of narrative, we can see, in the way that Doc's investigation nearly comes together, that narrative, despite all that Doc cannot know, is a useful way *to* know. The connections that can add up to *story*, so dangerous in *The Crying of Lot 49*, are once again a useful tool for mutual understanding and for making connections. That Doc doesn't solve the mystery, though, reminds us that we have not left postmodernism behind—that we are still trying to work within its theoretical positions.

The Post-Postmodern Shift in Context

Inherent Vice ends with an oddly beautiful scene that affirms the necessity of human interconnectedness. While driving on the Santa Monica Freeway in the final pages of the novel, a fog reduces visibility to nearly nothing,

> [Doc] crept along till he finally found another car to settle in behind. After a while in his rearview mirror he saw somebody else fall in behind him. He was in a convoy of unknown size, each car keeping the one ahead in tail light range, like a caravan in a desert of perception, gathered a while for safety in getting across a patch of blindness. (*Inherent* 368)

Each driver blindly depends on the driver in the car in front to lead him to safety. In *The Crying of Lot 49* cars remind Mucho Maas of the hopeless lives of their owners—the empty lives of the people who trade in their cars for a "futureless, automotive projection of somebody else's life" (*Crying* 5). These cars represent narratives of self-delusion. But in *Inherent Vice* we have a hopeful metaphor for the human condition. Everyone depends on someone else for safety. In *The Crying of Lot 49* Oedipa gets fed up and drives the freeways drunk hoping to be killed. Here the freeways are a site where one learns to live, rather than a site where one goes to die. Kathryn Hume argues that Pynchon's early novels contain alternate worlds evoked by paranoia as a source of connection, hope, and sometimes fear. *Inherent Vice*, she argues, is bereft of these. Instead, "the most we can do is little helpful acts at the personal level. Whether readers take those as hopeful and warming, or whether they find them futile and too disappointing to take seriously ultimately rests on readers' own sensibilities" (16). Far from finding it futile, I view these little helpful acts as an indication that we are moving into a post-postmodernist mode.

As we move through this world obscured by various forces that limit our ability to know, Pynchon seems to say, human interconnection is a potential way forward. *Inherent Vice* posits a *coherent* human experience as a means of survival. While the novel reminds us that we often cannot know, it seems to say that it is important that we try, and the method by which we come to understand each other is knowledge based in narrative. While *The Crying of Lot 49* harshly cut off the possibility that narrative could lead to a clearer understanding of the Tristero, *Inherent*

Vice still realizes that metanarratives are human constructions, but it also admits that they can be useful—just like the tenuous connection between cars in the fog. Nothing has really changed in our ability to know, just our attitude toward narrative and knowledge, but the effect of this difference in attitude is clear: at the end of their respective novels Oedipa is feeling suicidal and Doc is feeling connected.

David Foster Wallace, as I have already noted, seemed to be moving toward this attitude in his search for a New Sincerity. It seems that DeLillo, too, is working through a similar shift. Far from plots moving deathward, *Falling Man* contains a scene similar to the closing scene of *Inherent Vice*. As the survivors of the September 11 attacks escape the World Trade Center towers, "they had to walk blind, smoke so thick, hand on the shoulder of the person in front" (*Falling* 55). Another character in the novel runs "storyline sessions," in which Alzheimer's patients write various stories about their lives for "morale." The patients are instructed to write on themes such as "Remembering my father" and "What I always wanted to do but never did" (*Falling* 29), using conventional narrative tropes to make their lives make sense. Although this does not save them, it does bring them some joy. It is potentially some kind of plot that could save Keith when he has become a professional poker player and finds himself admitting that his life "makes no sense" (*Falling* 216). But DeLillo, like Pynchon, is ambivalent about this (the terrorists are also inspired by plots), and the solution is not offered. Still, the possibility is there.

The shift in attitude in *Inherent Vice* is also visible in other recent works by Pynchon. While *Against the Day* was written in, as Michel Wood puts it, Pynchon's "more usual stylistic mode," it does seem to be edging toward a shift in attitude. As Liesl Schillinger wrote in the *New York Times, Against the Day* is "buoyant, more mirthful than any of his previous books, with the qualified exception of 'The Crying of Lot 49,' which was too short and too narrow in scope to furnish the varieties of humor deployed here. In 'Against the Day,' Pynchon seems to be having fun with his characters." Hume writes that it seems to her like the "least paranoid" novel Pynchon had written up to that time (3). It seems Pynchon has continued to flirt with the idea that building connections has the potential to bring positive developments in his most recent novel, *Bleeding Edge*. In *Bleeding Edge* we have another detective and another not-quite-solved mystery. The book begins with private investigator Maxine looking into Gabriel Ice, who might be somehow connected to the funding of the September 11 attacks. The mystery proves too deep for Maxine to solve, but once again nearly all the pieces are in place. In this case the Internet, especially the Deep Web, has the potential to solve this complex global mystery. Maxine's father, Ernie, rails against the Internet: "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," representing what we might think of as a postmodernist feeling of suspicion about the power of the Internet. Maxine responds hopefully, "The Cold War ended, right? The internet kept evolving, away from military, into civilian—nowadays it's chat rooms, the World Wide Web, shopping online, the worst you can say is maybe it's getting a little commercialized. And look at how it's empowering all those billions of people, the promise, the freedom." Ernie is not convinced, seeing the web as "handcuffs of the future" (*Bleeding* 420). While Maxine is naive about the Internet—especially clear in this time of international hacking scandals, identity theft, and cyberbullying—her perspective represents a turn away from the often negatively oriented postmodernist ambivalence toward connection and focuses instead on its positive potential. A few pages later she encounters Lester Traipse on DeepArcher, the system she has been using to gain access to the Deep Web. Even though he is dead, she "sees no harm in treating him as a departed soul" (*Bleeding* 427) rather than some sort of trick. Earlier in the novel Maxine stumbled onto a group of victims of the September 11 attacks, who seem to have a digital afterlife. While we cannot know who created these profiles or to what ends, Maxine suspects that they have been created by family to provide a sort of virtual afterlife for their relatives (*Bleeding* 357–58). In addition to having the power to possibly transcend death, the Internet seems to hold all the answers to the September 11 attacks, if only one is able to pull them altogether. As in *Inherent Vice*, the mystery isn't solved, but the potential is there.

Inherent Vice's relationship with postmodernist metanarratives is complex: in form it encourages us to build narrative, and although the narrative is left incomplete, it does demonstrate the possibility and value of narratives. It both admits the faulty nature of narrative as a mode of knowledge but demonstrates its value despite that fact. In this way, *Inherent Vice* shows us the way forward without forgetting the past.

Notes

1. While there is still debate over this term, I have chosen to use it because two of the critics I cite, Adam Kelly and Nicoline Timmer, rely on it. Furthermore, as this essay will argue, I do not think we have entirely abandoned postmodernism's theoretical positions; therefore, I think it is important that the idea of postmodernism is maintained in the name of this new movement.
2. This also leads to the question of how many of these contemporary novels were inspired by Pynchon's earlier work, as *C* and *The Intuitionist* obviously were. I would argue that this question is irrelevant to my main point; whether he influenced these novels or not, they certainly look and feel like *Inherent Vice*; therefore, I think it is fair to take *Inherent Vice* as exemplary of much contemporary literary fiction.
3. Huber prefers the term "literature of reconstruction" to "post-postmodernism." She bases this on the idea that literature after postmodernism comes from a desire to construct—a notion she gleaned from Timmer, who prefers the term "post-postmodernism."
4. Wood uses the term "free indirect *Style*." I have substituted the more common "free indirect *Discourse*."
5. I do not mean to argue that McEwan himself wholeheartedly supports this position. He has made a career of writing unsettling fiction, and we should not confuse his narrator's argument for his own. Still, I think *Atonement* represents an exploration of the possibilities of productive narrative work after postmodernism. McEwan has also returned to these ideas in 2012's *Sweet Tooth*.
6. While it could be argued that Cal's grandmother, Desdemona, has told him the story of her courtship with his grandfather that he narrates over the first two hundred pages of the novel, it would be hard to believe: at this point Desdemona is beginning to experience senility and unable to attend her son's (Cal's father's) funeral. Tessie, her daughter-in-law, says that "her mind is going" (*Middlesex* 522). After being told about her son's death, she forgets that he has died an hour later. She even momentarily confuses Cal for her long-dead husband (524). Cal decides to sit with Desdemona while the rest of the family attends the funeral, and this is when Desdemona reveals the secret she has been hiding for many years: her husband was her brother. She is hesitant at first. Cal asks, "Papou was your cousin?," and she responds, "First cousin." Then, after more prompting, "Also brother" (527). It is difficult for her to admit even the bare facts. Because of these problems with Desdemona's memory and her reluctance to discuss the situation, it is impossible to believe that Desdemona told Cal about her relationship with his grandfather in the sort of detail Cal reports it to us. Cal's retelling includes details about their first kiss, details about their crossing to America (during which they assumed their new identities and used a lifeboat on the ship for sex) among many other moments that were either too private or too obscure to believe that a senile old woman told them in the span of a few hours. Cal is creating a fictional story in order to replace the one that he cannot access.

Note on Contributor

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