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"From Faraway California"

Thomas Pynchon's Aesthetics of Space in the California Trilogy
By Ali Dehdarirad
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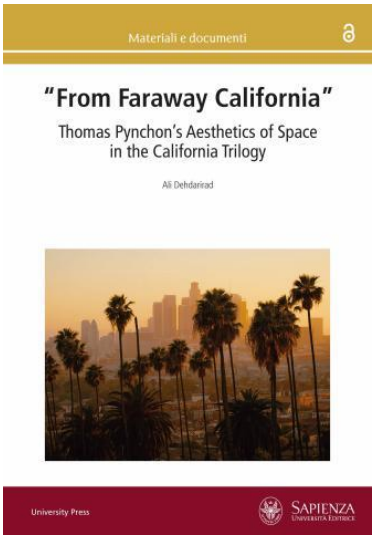
Reviewed by Marco Petrelli
University of Pisa
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1560-861X
Email: marco.petrelli@unipi.it



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In an oft-quoted passage from *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968), Joan Didion writes:

> California is a place in which a boom mentality and a sense of Chekhovian loss meet in uneasy suspension; in which the mind is troubled by some buried but ineradicable suspicion that things had better work here, because here, beneath that immense bleached sky, is where we run out of continent. (1968, 75)

Although somewhat played out after decades of scholarship dedicated to the role California holds in the contemporary American literary imagination, Didion's suggestive description is probably still unsurpassed when it comes to pinpointing the symbolic extremes that bracket her native state: a land where the potentially endless magnitude of expectation fueled by the American Dream clashes with its limits. And the fact that these limits overlap with the actual geographical edges of the nation is even more meaningful, because it's on California's shores that the American imagination is forced to grapple with the constraints of the palimpsest that, more than any other, has sustained its reveries – the landscape itself. The land, Brian Jarvis writes in his seminal work on geography and US culture, has "always loomed large in the imagination of America" (1998, 1). The critic adds a crucial element to this otherwise self-

explanatory remark, pointing out how the landscape tends to acquire either utopian or dystopian (or better, alternately utopian and dystopian) connotations when turned into literary geography. And, as the opening quote by Didion makes clear, no narrative setting makes this more evident – except, maybe, for the American South – than California.

Ali Dehdarirad's book, *"From Faraway California,"* approaches the polysemic, real-and-imagined – quoting Edward Soja – space of the Golden State as filtered and rendered by the works of one of the keenest explorers of the always shifting geography of America: Thomas Pynchon. Focusing on the so-called "California Trilogy," which comprises *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), *Vineland* (1990), and *Inherent Vice* (2009), Dehdarirad offers a meticulous dissection of Pynchon's urban spaces, with the ultimate aim of "better understand[ing], or at the very least represent[ing], certain aspects of urban spatial issues in the contemporary city" (31). With a certain degree of caution that nonetheless demonstrates remarkable ambition, the author also declares his intent to "shed light on what might take place with regard to the future of urbanism, especially the postmetropolitan transition toward the formation of the 'city region'" (31). The reference is once again to urban geographer Edward Soja and his *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* (2000), in which the very concept of urbanization is problematized in light of the global rise of megacities and their capillary interconnections with surrounding regions. Thanks to this properly global outlook, Dehdarirad's book is able to push Pynchon studies into the field of Planetary Humanities, a cogent epistemological shift from postmodernism proper (by far the most popular paradigm in Pynchon scholarship) that seeks to account for a "new structure of awareness" which takes the planet as "the axial dimension in which writers and artists perceive themselves, their histories, and their aesthetic practices" (Elias and Moraru 2015, xi, xii).

It is easy to see why Pynchon, among all other writers usually labeled as belonging to the postmodern milieu, is the one Dehdarirad considers most apt to foresee the future of urban space in a global context: his celebrated debut novel, *V.* (1963) and, more recently, *Against the Day* (2006), still stand as striking examples of planetary narratives that don't shy away from adopting Earth itself as their finely networked setting. But – and here lies a quite interesting and felicitous heuristic choice – rather than trying to enclose the whole planet in its geocritical analysis (a gargantuan enterprise always at risk of diluting, rather than producing, properly literary knowledge), *"From Faraway California"* zooms in on Pynchon's depiction of the southern West Coast of the US, thoroughly analyzing the novels' aesthetic and rhetorical minutiae through a sophisticated exercise in close reading capable of disclosing the macrocosm hidden in these texts. Such panoptic engagement is, after all, suggested by Pynchon himself in the first novel of his California Trilogy, *The Crying of Lot 49*, in which the fictional city of San Narciso is said to have "no borders" and is compared by protagonist Oedipa Maas to a "thick,

maybe endless" matrix (1966, 123, 114): a matrix that, like Pynchon's oeuvre writ large – and especially his works more influenced by the tropes of detective fiction – resists any attempt at being solved but contains nonetheless the potential to "*project a world*" (1966, 51, emphasis in the original). And it is precisely this hidden but all-encompassing world that Dehdarirad's book sets out to unearth.

"From Faraway California" opens with an engaging preface penned by Pynchon scholar Paolo Simonetti – an enriching addendum to the text. Then, in an exhaustive and well-structured introduction, Dehdarirad lays out the scope of his work and its methodological framework. Here, the book demonstrates its deep engagement with theories of urban space – Soja, of course, but also Michael Dear, Steven Flusty, and Nan Ellin, among others – whose hermeneutical tools are deployed to investigate Pynchon's novels, highlighting the social, historical, and political issues embedded in the author's cityscape aesthetics. The close attention paid to the extratextual dimension is balanced by an equally articulate engagement with literary theory proper. Geocriticism is brought into the picture to establish a necessary dialogue between California's actual history of urban development and its literary counterparts, bridging the gap between referent and representation – in what Bertrand Westphal would define as "referentiality" – to find meaning in their congruences and incongruences.[1] The theoretical apparatus is also expanded to postmodern theory and Pynchon studies, creating an impressive array of authoritative sources, as demonstrated by the concluding bibliography – as valuable as the book itself for scholars interested in these matters.

The first chapter is dedicated to *The Crying of Lot 49* and its representation of city space. Dehdarirad openly declares his intention to fill the "gap in the literature" by focusing exclusively on the urban dimension of Pynchon's novels but escapes the risk of producing a work that unproductively seeks originality in spite of rigor thanks to a thoughtful use of geocritical principles, which are put at the service of meticulous narrative analysis. "How can making sense of real places by understanding their fictionality, and vice versa, be useful in the literary understanding of a text?" he asks (70). By putting Pynchon's second novel in tight dialogue with theories of space and marginality, this chapter provides a captivating twist on the often-mentioned spatial-epistemological hermeneutics reflected in Oedipa Maas's quest for the Tristero and a subterranean America able to evade the clutch of power and capital.

The second chapter is dedicated to *Vineland*, perhaps one of Pynchon's most misunderstood works. The discussion on alternative worlds lying on the dark fringes of the US initiated in the previous chapter is deepened and developed, with particular attention to the spatial articulations of the novel's elegy of the Sixties. If spatiality in postmodern narrative is always

[1] For a detailed discussion of referentiality, see Westphal 2011, 75-110.

charged with cultural and epistemological issues, here *"From Faraway California"* makes abundantly clear how, for Pynchon, the construction of space is first and foremost a matter of politics: the representation of "fugitive space[s]" (128) hopelessly resisting the relentless encroachment of Reagan-era (and post-Reagan) repressive neoliberal hegemony. The imaginary Vineland County is then able to mobilize "a counter-hegemonic mapping that, albeit frail, gives the peripheral characters the chance of an alternative mode of being" (130). Highlighting – instead of neutering – the deep political implications of Pynchon's narrative allows Dehdarirad to unveil the author's radical representation of space as a wishful, and melancholic, geography of liberation.

With the last chapter, dedicated to *Inherent Vice*, the journey through Pynchon's real-and-imagined (and resistant) California is complete. The chapter also completes the evolution of the relationship between the author's novels and the postmodern spatial milieu, convincingly arguing that the California Trilogy can also be understood as a map leading the reader through the late-capitalist development of the contemporary cityscape, and towards post-postmodern urbanism and its social and political repercussions. The 1970s of the novel are then read as a thinly veiled allegory for a post-2008 recession America. Soja's concepts of "new regionalism" and the "city region," which had also been useful in unraveling *Vineland*'s spatial dimension, are here deployed more elaborately to open the path for a planetary understanding of Pynchon's oeuvre. *Inherent Vice*'s epigraph from France's May '68 – "under the paving stones, the beach!" – serves to underline the text's Deleuzian will to deterritorialize and reterritorialize the spaces of contemporary neoliberal hegemony. The next move, as Dehdarirad writes, is that from the beach to the ocean: a mythical space of redemption, "the last frontier of the American dream that might hopefully offer 'something else'" (167), an alternative reality from this fraught modern world.

Such a glimpse of hope occupies the afterword, where Pynchon's latest novel, *Bleeding Edge* (2013), is taken as an example of the author's hints at the future of urbanism. It is a long way from California, but where else could Pynchon's poetics of global space come full circle if not in the ultimate mesh of symbol and referent, language and matter, reality and virtuality represented by the novel's New York City? This "Pynchonopolis," as Dehdarirad half-jokingly writes, "seems to represent a correlation between the possibilities of space at large and human eudaimonia, even in a post-9/11 world" (183). Once again, the focus is on the plethora of unrealized possibilities hidden in Thomas Pynchon's narrative spaces, and subsequently on the possibility of resisting, and redressing, the global order that the author scrutinizes – and so vehemently opposes – in his novels. At the conclusion of this clear-sighted analysis, we are left with a decidedly Pynchonesque sense of suspension: the hieroglyphs have been deciphered; a map has been drawn. What lies ahead, however, remains unwritten. Yet *"From Faraway*

California" chooses to believe in – and upholds – what Pynchon himself once called "the dreamscape of the future."

Bionote

Marco Petrelli is tenure-track Assistant Professor of Anglo-American literature at the University of Pisa. He authored *Paradiso in nero: spazio e mito nella narrativa di Cormac McCarthy* (2020), *Nick Cave. Preghiere di fuoco e ballate assassine* (2021), and several essays dedicated to the literature and culture of the US South, American Gothic fiction, African American literature, geocriticism and graphic narratives.

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