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***FOREWORD to Dr T. RAVICHANDRAN*,**
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"... the onset, the leading edge, of the discovery that everything is connected"
Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973)

"The best connections, after all, are coaxial: the signal goes both ways."
John Barth, "The Spanish Connection" (1984)

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I

The aim of the study to which this essay is a foreword is to illuminate the postmodern sensibility, as it manifests itself in the earlier literary work of two major living American writers: John Barth (born 1930) and Thomas Pynchon (born 1937). It analyses such works of fiction as *V., The Crying of Lot 49, Gravity's Rainbow* and *Vineland* (Pynchon) and *The Floating Opera*, *The End of the Road*, *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *Giles Goat-Bo*y (Barth), with the objective of throwing light on them as classic instances of the postmodern, or postmodernism. The reader will therefore immediately ask: "what is postmodernism?," and it is incumbent on the author of the foreword, before the reader starts on the book proper, to point towards at least some of the answers without further ado.

"Postmodernism" is a notoriously slippery term, all too often bandied about in fashionable circles without a proper definition. The prefix "post" is itself ambiguous, as it can imply either or both of two standpoints towards the earlier tendencies know as "modern": that which comes after the modern (sequentially) or that which counterdistinguishes itself from the modern (reactively). That ambiguity itself immediately begets another question, namely "what is the modern?" (or "what is modernism?"). In addition, the notion of postmodernism is now routinely applied to a whole host of different spheres - to literature but also to architecture, philosophy, politics, and a wide range of lifestyle areas. In the literary sphere, there is also a real but imperfect overlap with certain other key contemporary concepts, notably "magic realism" and "postcolonialism."

Definition is therefore as problematic as it is necessary. In the literary context, the most useful summation of "postmodernism" that I have found is one which I serendipitously located on the Internet, namely that of Rudolf Beck and Hildegard and Martin Kuester, from a German reference work:[1] "Cultural phase or era following that of modernism and in part continuing, in

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[1] From Rudolf Beck, Hildegard Kuester and Martin Kuester (eds.), *Terminologie der Literaturwissenschaft: Ein Handbuch für das Anglistikstudium* (Ismaning: Hueber, 1998); English translation of definition by Martin Kuester, reproduced at: <www.wtc.ab.ca/tedyck/RN.1.forum.mk.htm>.

part negating its cultural programme." This definition is mercifully brief and informative, encapsulating the term's innate ambiguity in a few words; it also points forthwith to the need to define the modern or modernism in literature.

At this point we may refer to the working definition of "modernism" supplied by another work of reference, the 1995 edition of the *Oxford Companion to English Literature*. The entry "Modernism" defines its subject as "an omnibus term for a number of tendencies in the arts which were prominent in the first half of the 20th century." These "tendencies" include: (a) "a persistent experimentalism;" (b) "an awareness of the irrational and the workings of the unconscious mind;" (c) "a stream-of-consciousness presentation of personality;" and (d) "a dependence … upon myth as a characteristic structural principle".[2] The most representative modernist works in the English language are generally held to be the two celebrated texts of 1922, T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" and James Joyce's *Ulysses*, both of which exhibit all the above features. This is of course a literature-oriented definition, but its presuppositions also apply, mutatis mutandis, to such other areas as architecture, visual art, music, dance, etc.

It is commonly agreed that at some point between the end of the Second World War and the student revolt of 1968 a "postmodern turn" occurred: modernism began to mutate definitively into something else, into that elusive phenomenon which is now called postmodernism. While it is certainly not the case that all literature since 1945 can be called postmodern - Graham Greene, J.D. Salinger and R.K. Narayan are examples of universally respected post-war writers in English to whom no-one would attach that label - it is equally true that the term is held to characterise a large number of the most influential contemporary or recent writers worldwide. The role of founding father or unavoidable precursor usually falls to the Argentinian Jorge Luis Borges, who wrote his most significant "fictions" or short stories in the 1940s; under the Borgesian wing, the label "postmodern" has been attached to, among others, the following writers of the second half of the twentieth century and/or the dawn of the twenty-first: Italo Calvino and Umberto Eco (Italy), José Saramago (Portugal), Alejo Carpentier (Cuba), Gabriel García Márquez (Colombia), Julio Cortázar (Argentina), Peter Carey (Australia), Margaret Atwood and Michael Ondaatje (Canada), as well as such writers of the Indian diaspora as Salman Rushdie, Vikram Chandra and Amitav Ghosh - not forgetting, of course, our two Americans Barth and Pynchon.

Fredric Jameson, in his influential essay of 1984 "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism",[3] proposed a quite early definition of the postmodern, stressing a number of characteristics that differentiate the movement from the earlier "high modernism." These include: (a) "the effacement (…) of the (…) frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture, and the emergence of new kinds of texts infused with the forms, categories, and contents of that very culture industry so passionately denounced by all the ideologues of the modern;" (b) "a new depthlessness, which finds its prolongation in (…) a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum;" (c) "a (…) weakening of historicity, both in our relationship to public History and in the new forms of our private temporality;" and (d) "the deep constitutive relationships of all this to a whole new technology, which is itself a figure for a whole new economic world system." Jameson's placing of postmodernism in

[2] Drabble (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (5th edn.), 668, entry "Modernism."
[3] Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." This essay was originally published in New Left Review in 1984, and later became the first chapter of Jameson's book of the same name of 1991. The quotations are taken from the extracts reproduced at:
<www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/us/jameson.htm>.

relation to technology, over a decade before the World Wide Web began to interlink the planet's destinies, appears particularly salient.

Douglas Kellner and Stephen Best, writing in 1991,[4] offer a historical overview of the concept that is worth quoting in some detail. They trace the signifier "postmodern" back to the nineteenth century: "An English painter, John Watkins Chapman, spoke of 'postmodern painting' around 1870 to designate painting that was allegedly more modern and avant-garde than French impressionist painting," while making it clear that the term only began to take off after World War II: "the notion of a 'postmodern' break with the modern age appeared in a one-volume summation by D. C. Somervell of the first six volumes of British historian Arnold Toynbee's *A Study of History* (1947), and thereafter Toynbee himself adopted the term, taking up the notion of the postmodern age in Volumes VIII and IX of (...) *A Study of History* (…) (1954). Somervell and Toynbee suggested the concept of a 'post-Modern' age, beginning in 1875 (…) Toynbee described the age as one of anarchy and total relativism.." In 1957, "economist Peter Drucker published *The Landmarks of Tomorrow*, subtitled *A Report on the New Post-Modern World* (…). For Drucker, postmodern society was roughly equivalent to what would later be called 'postindustrial society' and Drucker indeed came to identify himself with this tendency." Two decades later, "Charles Jencks' influential book, *The Language of Modern Architecture* (1977), celebrated a new post-modern style based on eclecticism and populism, and helped to disseminate the concept of the postmodern." After that, the postmodern debates began in earnest in the 1970s and "took on an international scope and resonance by the 1980s".[5]

Kellner and Best define postmodernism in the following terms: "Postmodern discourses (...) denote new artistic, cultural, or theoretical perspectives which renounce modern discourses and practices." They add that "many postmodern theorists deploy the term (...) to characterize a dramatic rupture or break in Western history" and that "a postmodernist ... calls for new categories, modes of thought and writing, and values and politics to overcome the deficiencies of modern discourses and practices," while entering the caveat that "there is no unified postmodern theory, or even a coherent set of positions." This said, they nonetheless emulate Jameson in trying to identify a certain "set of positions" as characteristic of the postmodern. These include: (a) a rejection of the "grand narratives" of all earlier world-views that claim to "totalise" reality, notably those of the Enlightenment and Marxism: "Modern theory (…) is criticized for its search for a foundation of knowledge, for its universalizing and totalizing claims;" (b) the replacement of those "grand narratives" by "'perspectivist' and 'relativist' positions that theories at best provide partial perspectives on their objects, and that all cognitive representations of the world are historically and linguistically mediated," and by the notion of "the arbitrary and conventional nature of everything social - language, culture, practice, subjectivity, and society itself;" (c) the attribution of a defining role to technology, on the supposition that "technologies such as computers and media, new forms of knowledge, and changes in the socio-economic system are producing a postmodern social formation;" (d) a consciousness of major perceptual changes at work in society, with "the emergence of increased cultural fragmentation, changes in the experience of space and time, and new modes of experience, subjectivity, and culture" and the rejection of "modern assumptions of social coherence and notions of causality in favour of multiplicity, plurality, fragmentation, and indeterminacy;" (e) disbelief in conventional notions of the unified or coherent individual:

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[4] The Kellner and Best text cited here, "In Search of the Postmodern," originally appeared as chapter 1 of *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*, London: Macmillan, 1991. It is republished on the Internet at: <www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/pomo/ch1.html>.
[5] Kellner and Best, loc. cit.

"postmodern theory abandons the rational and unified subject (…)in favour of a socially and linguistically decentred and fragmented subject;" and (f), in aesthetic practice, total rejection of any idea that art can save the world: "The elements of sociopolitical critique characteristic of the historical avant-garde and desire for radically new art forms are replaced by pastiche, quotation and play with past forms, irony, cynicism, commercialism, and in some cases downright nihilism".[6]

For the specific domain of literature, with which we are mainly concerned in this book, the wide-ranging analysis of Kellner and Best, which takes in the postmodern cultural universe in its multiple manifestations, is usefully complemented by the considerations systematised by Mary Klages (2003). The salient aspects of literary postmodernism according to Klages - some pushing forward the dynamic of modernism, others breaking completely with the modernist outlook - may be summarised as follows: (a) "Postmodernism, like modernism, [disavows] boundaries between high and low forms of art, rejecting rigid genre distinctions, emphasizing pastiche, parody, bricolage, irony, and playfulness;" (b) "Postmodern art (...) favors reflexivity and self-consciousness, fragmentation and discontinuity (especially in narrative structures), ambiguity, simultaneity, and an emphasis on the destructured, decentered, dehumanized subject;" and (c) "Postmodernism, in contrast [to modernism], doesn't lament the idea of fragmentation, provisionality, or incoherence, but rather celebrates that".[7] The concepts of pastiche and parody, self-reflexiveness and fragmentation will all prove especially useful for the concrete analysis of postmodernist works.

II

Armed with the definitions supplied by Jameson, Kellner and Best and Klages, the reader may feel more confident about venturing on the stormy seas of postmodernism, and confronting concrete texts by actual postmodernist writers. Thomas Pynchon and John Barth, on whom Dr Ravichandran has chosen to concentrate his expository energies, are excellent choices for this purpose. Both have the advantage of being considered exemplars of postmodernism while also being universally accepted members of the canon, or inner circle, of twentieth-century American literature. Barth and Pynchon are in some ways very different figures: Pynchon is notorious for his reclusiveness (it is said that not a single photograph of him is in circulation), and scarcely exists for the world outside of his five novels and a handful of short stories and essays, whereas Barth is a theorist as well as a practitioner of postmodernism, and has always been very much a public figure, occupying a chair in Creative Writing at Baltimore's prestigious Johns Hopkins University from 1973 until his retirement in 1995. Both, however, have had their literary talents amply recognised for decades - and by critics as eminent as Malcolm Bradbury and Harold Bloom.

Malcolm Bradbury, writing in a reference book of 1971 (before "postmodernism" had become an established term), praised Barth as the author of "four brilliant novels which have lately won him a high reputation among critics";[8] in the same volume, Bradbury's co-editor Eric Mottram lauded Pynchon, who had then published two novels, as "one of the few important literary talents of the 1960s".[9] In 1990, it was Bradbury again who, writing on the then state of

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[6] Kellner and Best, loc. cit.
[7] Klages, "Postmodernism" (2003), <www.colorado.edu/English/ENGL2012Klages/pomo.html>.
[8] Bradbury, entry "Barth, John," in Bradbury and Mottram (ed.), *The Penguin Companion to Literature 3: United States & Latin American Literature* (1971), 28.
[9] Mottram, entry "Pynchon, Thomas," in Bradbury and Mottram, op. cit., 213.

the novel and those whom he saw as its most significant exponents, spoke of "the attempts of John Barth to recover a literature of replenishment from an era of literary exhaustion," as a pendent to "the cybernetic novels of Thomas Pynchon (…), where the characters become comic units swamped in a technological world coded with arbitrary plots".[10] Harold Bloom included the first three novels of both Barth and Pynchon in the reading list attached to earlier editions of his book *The Western Canon* (first published in 1994);[11] and Bloom's more recent praise of Pynchon has included a chapter on *The Crying of Lot 49* in his volume of 2000, *How To Read And Why*,[12] as well as a statement of 2002 in which he brackets the reclusive novelist in a quartet of the planet's greatest living writers of fiction, alongside Saramago, García Márquez and fellow American Philip Roth.[13] Whatever ambivalences may surround the notion of canon in postmodern theory, it is unlikely that either Barth or Pynchon would demur at their long-standing admission into the de facto late-twentieth-century pantheon. Meanwhile, the works of both are, in a suitably postmodern development, avidly dissected on the Internet by admirers worldwide.

Both writers may be said to have exhibited postmodern traits in their writing even before the term was in general circulation. Barth's first published novel, *The Floating Opera* (1956), foregrounds an avowedly fragmented and unstable first-person narrator, and begins with that narrator self-reflexively observing himself writing; it also includes episodes that obviously pastiche or parody elements from one of the central texts of American literature, Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. Pynchon's debut short story, "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna" (1959),[14] includes ironic quotations or quotations-of-quotations from the modernist or proto-modernist canon (scraps of text by Charles Baudelaire and Joseph Conrad, which had themselves been quoted by T.S. Eliot in "The Waste Land"). It also back-handedly evokes one of modernism's Grand Narratives, namely Freudian psychoanalysis - but with no promise of therapeutic transcendence, no redeeming illumination of what Pynchon's narrator calls the "badlands of the heart."

Barth later became a leading light of postmodernist theory, with his influential essay of 1967, "The Literature of Exhaustion." He argued there that to write clones of the nineteenth-century novel is totally inappropriate to present-day conditions, just as "Beethoven's Sixth Symphony or Chartres Cathedral if executed today would be merely embarrassing."[15] For Barth, the challenge facing the contemporary novelist is not to go "following Dostoevsky or Tolstoy or Flaubert or Balzac," but to resolve "the real technical question (…) how to succeed not even Joyce and Kafka, but those who've succeeded Joyce and Kafka."[16] This already contains in germ the idea of the postmodern, and Barth proposes the self-reflective metafictionality of his own practice as pointing the way ahead: "if you were the author of this paper, you'd have written something like *The Sot-Weed Factor* or *Giles Goat-Boy*: novels which imitate the form of the Novel, by an author who imitates the role of Author".[17] In his later, equally polemical address "'The Parallels!' - Italo Calvino and Jorge Luis Borges" (1997), Barth referred to his manifesto of thirty years before "as a sort of protopostmodernist manifesto called 'The Literature of Exhaustion'," and his comments on the postmodern precursor Borges

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[10] Bradbury, introduction to *The Novel Today* (1990), 8.
[11] Bloom, *The Western Canon* (1995 edition), 565.
[12] Bloom, "Thomas Pynchon," in *How To Read And Why* (2000), 249-254.
[13] Bloom, introduction to *El futur de la imaginació* (2002), 12.
[14] Pynchon, "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna," Epoch (Cornell University), Spring 1959, Vol IX, No. 4; reproduced at: <www.themodernword.com/pynchon/pynchon_mortality.html>.
[15] Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967), 73.
[16] Barth, ibid., 74.
[17] Barth, ibid., 80.

and the postmodern exponent Calvino remain very much in the spirit of that earlier text: he praises both fabulists as being "disinclined to the social/psychological realism that for better or worse persists as the dominant mode in North American fiction," reading the Argentinian as the arch-practitioner of "the principle of metaphoric means" and enthroning the Italian as "the very model of a modern major Postmodernist."[18] Barth clearly wants his readers to see Borges' labyrinths and Calvino's invisible cities as forerunner images for his own work. Pynchon, as we have seen, is no postmodern theorist in the Barthian mould, but his world too is haunted by the ghost of Borges. *The Crying of Lot 49* could be read as the novel that Borges never wrote, while *Gravity's Rainbow* mentions the Buenos Aires master directly, through the mouth of an exiled Argentinian anarchist, and features a character named Katje Borgesius. As for the "principle of metaphoric means" and the rejection of "social/psychological realism," a similar position on writing is implicit in Pynchon's epigraph to the third section of, again, *Gravity's Rainbow*: quoting Dorothy's famous words from *The Wizard of Oz*, "Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas any more," he is effectively warning his readers that they are in a textual universe not ruled by the laws of realism.

Dr Ravichandran has expounded and tabulated the different elements in the earlier work of Barth and Pynchon that may best be considered representative of postmodernism. These include, for both writers: (a) a deconstructed vision of identity - a self without a centre, a person without a personality, a succession of roles; (b) a continual tension between the external social order and a precarious inner psychic structure; (c) an abiding pathology or collection of maladies - a condition called "Cosmopsis" by Barth (*The End of the Road*) and "Entropy" by Pynchon (*The Crying of Lot 49*); (d) arbitrary control systems offered as problematic remedies for the maladies - Mythotherapy (Barth) and Cybernetics (Pynchon); (e) the ironic and subversive invocation of myth, perceived as no longer able to impose order on chaos; (f) the breakdown of teleological or goal-oriented narrative, in favour of open-endedness or even total indeterminacy; and (g) the triumph of fluidity over fixity (as in, Ravichandran argues, the ever-shifting, never-pinned-down symbolism of *V.*, the eponymous title-letter of Pynchon's first novel). Despite the multiple similarities evoked between Barth and Pynchon, Ravichandran is also aware of the differences between them, stressing, notably, that where Barth's role-playing characters write their own scripts, Pynchon's manipulated entities live scripts pre-written for them. As the reader will discover, the critical exposition offered of the parallel universes of the two writers is remarkable both for its theoretical sweep and its attention to textual detail.

The world of postmodern narrative is one of infinite possibility (Barth) or overwhelming complexity (Pynchon). This multiplicity of the text is summed up in a passage from "And Then One Day," a short story which Barth published in 1994, where the female protagonist, a successful novelist, visualises her own future narrating self:

> On this telling she imagines herself then, an old woman at a writing-table in her father's house or some other, having in the course of her long and by-no-means-uneventful life done this and this and this but not that, or that and that but never this, with such-and-such consequences - the whole catalogue of actions, reactions, and happenstances amounting to no more than an interminable Beginning: a procession of jester/gallants acting out before a complaisant-miened but ultimately impassive princess.[19]

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[18] Barth, "The Parallels!," loc. cit.

[19] Barth, "And Then One Day," in "Three Stories" (<u>Conjunctions</u>, 22, Spring 1994); reproduced at: <www.conjunctions.com/archives/c22-jb.htm>.

If the postmodern mode transforms narrative into a Borgesian garden of forking paths, then what the reader new to the game needs most is a map. In this connection, Jameson has argued in favour of "an aesthetic of cognitive mapping" - a pedagogical culture which would "seek to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system."[20] If we apply Jameson's method to literary criticism in relation to postmodern works, we may conclude that Ravichandran, in this book, offers us such a cognitive map of the postmodernist text - a map enabling the reader to successfully navigate the complexities of the new mode of writing.

III

I shall now broaden out the discussion, to consider some of the ways in which Ravichandran's account of the earlier works of Barth and Pynchon connects with more recent developments in the wider world. Of particular significance here are Information Technology, Globalisation and Postcolonialism, and these phenomena will be examined in succession.

The presentation of information technology in the works of Barth and Pynchon discussed by Ravichandran is - as is clear from his exposition of the IBM-style cybernetics of *The Crying of Lot 49* or the WESCAC computer in *Giles Goat-Boy* - that of an age which readers will no longer recognise. The mainframe has been upstaged by the network; computers are no longer unidirectional control instruments but multidirectional communication tools; the rulers still watch the ruled, but the ruled now also watch the rulers. The cyberguru Manuel Castells stresses, in his book *The Internet Galaxy* (2001), how from the beginning the "most distinctive feature" of the Internet has been "its openness, both in its technical architecture and in its social/institutional organisation;" this openness, he argues, proved to be the new medium's "main strength" when it emerged, "as users became producers of the technology, and shapers of the whole network."[21] Ironically, Marshall McLuhan's famous prediction of the global village has now become reality, but not through the medium he expected. In *Understanding Media* (1964), the Canadian prophet asked rhetorically, "Might not our current translation of our entire lives into the spiritual form of information seem to make of the entire globe … a single consciousness?,"[22] but located that evolving consciousness in the "all-inclusive *nowness*" and "seamless web of experience"[23] which he associated with television, a one-way medium - failing to anticipate the emergence, through computer technology, of the two-way or multidirectional medium that is today's Internet.

Several of the most representative postmodern writers, as well as postmodernism's presiding genius, Borges, are today read as foreshadowing key characteristics of cyberspace as we now know it. Borges' proto-cybernetic vision has been expounded in numerous studies, themselves typically published on the Internet, of which one example, apposite to present purposes, is the essay of 2002 by Davin O'Dwyer, "Searching for Cyberspace: Joyce, Borges, and Pynchon."[24] The relationship between Borges' stories and subsequent information technology is somewhat complex. Certain of his "fictions," such as "The Lottery in Babylon" ("La Lotería en Babilonia," 1941), which portrays a city where social roles are allocated by an arbitrary and

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[20] Jameson, "Postmodernism," loc. cit.
[21] Castells, *The Internet Galaxy* (2001), 26, 27.
[22] McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (1964), 61.
[23] McLuhan, op. cit., 335.
[24] O'Dwyer, "Searching for Cyberspace: Joyce, Borges, and Pynchon" (2002)., <www.themodernword.com/borges/odwyer.html>.

unquestionable system, are assimilable to the mainframe model. His famous story "The Library of Babel" ("La Biblioteca de Babel," 1941), faces both ways, adumbrating the enormous library that is the Internet (and its information overload) while failing to anticipate the future network's key characteristic of being co-produced by its readers.[25] Other Borgesian texts, however, seem to bypass the mainframe epoch together and point with surprising clarity direct to the age of the networks. "Funes the Memorious" ("Funes el Memorioso," 1942), the X-ray portrait of someone whose infallible, endlessly detailed memory prevents him from synthesising data which thus become useless, has been read by Umberto Eco as foreshadowing today's perilous risk of knowledge overkill ("Our society is gearing itself up to possessing an electronic brain constructed on the model of the brain of Funes 'el memorioso'. The inability to filter out entails the impossibility to discriminate").[26] Even more uncanny prolepses of cyberspace appear in Borges' narratives "The Sect of the Phoenix" ("La Secta del Fénix," 1952) and 'The Congress' ("El Congreso," 1971), both of which centre on imaginary communities, scattered across the face of the earth, whose mode of organisation bizarrely resembles that of later bulletin boards or Usenet groups. Above all, in 1940 Borges published "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbus Tertius," the tale of how a mysterious parallel universe gradually but ineluctably encroaches on the real world - a text now, inevitably, read as an allegory of the Internet days to come. O'Dwyer declares: "Substitute 'cyberspace' or 'the Net' for 'Tlön', and you have a dystopian McLuhanesque vision of the perils of our networked society, warning against the increasingly blurred boundaries between the 'real' and the 'virtual'".[27] The extent to which either Borges' Tlön or the Internet is or is not "dystopian" can be argued over indefinitely, but the structural similarity is no longer in doubt.

The ambiguity found in Borges carries over into Italo Calvino's anticipations of cyberspace. In 1967, Calvino published an essay called "Cybernetics and Ghosts" ("Cibernetica e Fantasmi") in which he expressed a decidedly mainframe vision of writing being given over to computers, asking rhetorically: "Will we … have machines capable of conceiving and composing poems and novels?," and even declaring: "It is with a clear conscience and without regrets that I state that my place could perfectly well be occupied by a mechanical device."[28] Nonetheless, a recent interpretation of *Invisible Cities* (*Città Invisibili*), Calvino's classic fictional work of 1972, by Virgílio Almeida, a Brazilian professor of computer science (2002), notes the remarkable convergence between certain of that book's imaginary cities and aspects of the Internet (a "tangle of stretched strings," a "spider-web city"), and concludes that Calvino's text eerily predicts how "we ourselves are becoming ever more connected to the 'invisible natures'," as "the spider-web which sustains our modern life is created through … communication networks".[29] Utopia or dystopia, Calvino's fictional visions, like those of Borges, are now read as adumbrations of the information society.

Similar fast-forwardings to the networked world appear in the earlier (pre-Internet) fictions of Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh. *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie's celebrated novel of 1981, foregrounds a secret community of hyper-gifted individuals, all born at the moment of India's independence, who stand out from the mass thanks to their magic gifts, and communicate by means of a kind of immaterial or paranormal radio network, a "loose sort of federation of equals, all points of view given free expression" called the "Midnight's Children's

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[25] On this story in relation to the Internet, see my own article, "Borges' 'Library of Babel' and the Internet" (1999, rev. 2000), at: <www.themodernword.com/borges/borges_papers_rollason2.html>.

[26] Eco, "Signs of the Times" (1999), 192.

[27] O'Dwyer, loc. cit.

[28] Calvino, "Cybernetics and Ghosts" (1967), 229, 233.

[29] Almeida, "Invisible Natures" (2002), 298, 299.

Conference" - which, with hindsight, now reads as a prefigurement of the Internet.[30] Ghosh's first novel, *The Circle of Reason* (1986), features weaving as a key motif symbolising human connection, while linking the ancient art directly to the development of computers, and offers the pregnant aphorism: "Weaving is hope because it has no country, no continent"[31] - which, again, if one substitutes "the Internet" for "weaving," now appears eminently prophetic. Both Rushdie and Ghosh have made direct use of the Internet as a theme in more recent novels, but their earlier anticipations are in many ways of greater interest.

Barth and Pynchon may both, too, be situated somewhere inside the spider' web that links postmodern fiction to the Internet: the "mainframe" elements in their earlier work do not represent the sole direction taken by their encounters with the cyberworld. Barth's *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road* both feature first-person narrators who endlessly ponder their different alternatives for action, set out as if anticipating a hypertext menu. Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, despite its recurring theme of central control, has been read as, in certain episodes and details, anticipating the Internet universe. Brian Stonehill, in a 1994 article entitled "Pynchon's Prophecies of Cyberspace," argues that, "despite the narrative's seemingly unambiguous hostility to the binary and its manifest ridicule of the digital, (…) Pynchon in his 1973 novel not only curses but precurses what we now glibly dub cyberspace. He does so (…) imbuing *Gravity's Rainbow* with a subterranean sense, as it were, that the planet we inhabit is itself alive;"[32] while Davin O'Dwyer, in the 2002 essay already cited, finds in the same novel a number of "intriguing elements (…) which in retrospect demand to be read as anticipating the worldwide network we have established around us,"[33] one such element being the seemingly bizarre episode that presents a network of instantaneous communication between light-bulbs, prophetically named "*the Grid*".[34]

In the years since those earlier texts, both Barth and Pynchon have given explicit consideration to the computer world, albeit Barth's take on information technology is far more positive than the techno-sceptical Pynchon's. In "Virtuality," an article of 1994, the Maryland novelist declared: "A book-person myself, I nevertheless keep an open mind and a mindful eye on the parameters of the medium, the edge of the envelope," adding on hypertext: "if I were 24 instead of 64, I dare say I'd be vigorously exploring its possibilities for my fictive purposes".[35] His short story "CLICK," published in 1997, soon after the Internet had taken off as a mass phenomenon, does, precisely, explore the "possibilities for fictive purposes" of the World Wide Web, comically charting a tidewater couple's discovery of cyberspace, while concluding that the new medium is simply a manifestation writ large of something that already existed, the "hypertextuality of everyday life":

> That's "hypertext," guys, in the sense meant here (…) : not the literal menus-of-menus and texts-behind-texts that one finds on CD-ROMs and other computer applications but rather the all-but-infinite array of potential explanations, illustrations, associations, glosses and exempla, even stories, that may be said to lie not only behind any verbal formulation but also behind any real-world image, scene, action, interaction. Enough said?[36]

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[30] Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (1981; London: Picador, 1982),.220.
[31] Ghosh, *The Circle of Reason* (1986; London: Granta, 1998), 58.
[32] Stonehill, "Pynchon's Prophecies of Cyberspace" (1994), <www.pynchon.pomona.edu/gr/bsto.html>.
[33] O'Dwyer, loc. cit.
[34] According to some computer scientists, the next step up from the Web will become known as "the Grid."
[35] Barth, "Virtuality" (1994), <www.jhu.edu/~jhumag/994web/culture1.html>.
[36] Barth, "CLICK," Atlantic Monthly, Volume 280, No. 6, December 1997, 81-96; republished at:
<www.tnellen.com/cybereng/barth.htm>.

By contrast, Pynchon, in "Is it O.K. to be a Luddite?," an essay published in (be it noted) 1984, expressed clear, if partial, sympathy with the nineteenth-century machine-breakers known as Luddites and, indeed, "the perennial Luddite ambivalence about machines": he predicted that humanity's "next great challenge" would be "when the curves of research and development in artificial intelligence, molecular biology and robotics all converge."[37] In that essay he did not quite take sides, but in 2003, in a foreword to a new edition of - yes, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, he wrote:

> What has steadily, insidiously improved since then [i.e. since 1949, when Orwell's novel was published], of course, making humanist arguments almost irrelevant, is the technology. We must not be too distracted by the clunkiness of the means of surveillance current in [Orwell's character] Winston Smith's era. In "our" 1984, after all, the integrated circuit chip was less than a decade old, and almost embarrassingly primitive next to the wonders of computer technology circa 2003, most notably the Internet, a development that promises social control on a scale those quaint old 20th-century tyrants with their goofy mustaches could only dream about.[38]

Here, Pynchon seems to have aligned himself with the anti-technological fringes of the green movement, seeing the Internet not as humanising but as dehumanising, as a means not of communication among citizens but of "social control." He seems to have forgotten that the Internet is a two-way medium. Meanwhile and despite this, one cybercitizen, Eric Ketzan, in 2002 chose the corpus of on-line reviews of *Gravity's Rainbow* for a ground-breaking analysis of Internet reader reviews and the ways in which they are democratising criticism.[39] No doubt as cyberspace evolves, postmodern writers will continue to position themselves in multiple and shifting locations both inside and outside it; and so, too, will their readers.

IV

The whole phenomenon of information technology is intimately linked to globalisation, and the place and role of postmodern writing has inevitably to be examined in the new context created by that process. At the same time, the postmodern and postcolonial schools (of both literature and criticism) are linked in a close but ambivalent relationship, while the postcolonial world-view is itself both a product of and reaction against globalisation. I shall now attempt to situate postmodernism, both in general and as represented by Barth and Pynchon, in its interaction with both globalisation and postcolonialism.

Globalisation is defined by one of its foremost exponents, Anthony Giddens, in the 2002 edition of his book *Runaway World*, as "a shift in our life circumstances" by which human beings are "creating something that has never existed before - a global cosmopolitan society" - even if, he adds, that new cosmopolitanism is "emerging in an anarchic, haphazard fashion"

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[37] Pynchon, "Is it O.K. to be a Luddite?" (1984),
<www.themodernword.com/pynchon/pynchon_essays_luddite.html>.
[38] Pynchon, "Foreword" to Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (2003), xvi.
[39] Ketzan, "Amazon.com and the New Democracy of Opinion: Case Study - *Gravity's Rainbow*" (2002).,
<www.themodernword.com/pynchon/papers_ketzan1.html>. This essay analyses 133 reader reviews posted at
<www.amazon.com>.

rather than being "driven by collective human will."[40] A threefold breakdown of the phenomenon is posited by the veteran historian Eric Hobsbawm, writing in 2000. Globalisation entails, he argues, the following aspects: technical ("the abolition of space and time"), economic ("the abolition of trade barriers and liberalisation of markets"), and cultural ("the trend towards homogenisation").[41]

Further useful clarification is provided by, once again, Douglas Kellner, who, in a 1998 essay entitled "Globalization and the Postmodern Turn," writes:

> The rapidity of globalization with its space-time compression, its simultaneous forms of mass communication, its instantaneous financial transactions, and an increasingly integrated world market is surely a novelty. New technologies are changing the nature of work and creating new forms of leisure, including the hyperreality of cyberspace, new virtual realities, and new modes of information and entertainment. Capital is producing a new technoculture, a new form of the entertainment and information society.[42]

Kellner relates globalisation to postmodernism thus: "the discourse of globalization can be articulated with both theories of the modern and the postmodern because we are currently involved in an interregnum period between an aging modern and an emerging postmodern era," adding that "globalization is not only a replacement term for imperialism and modernization, but it is caught up in the modernity/postmodernity debates as well".[43]

It is argued by some that globalisation is at bottom merely a new form of colonisation. Such a view, however, can only be an oversimplification, for, as Giddens points out, "globalisation is becoming increasingly decentred," and one of its characteristics is a process which he usefully calls "reverse colonisation," by which "non-Western countries influence developments in the West" - as in "the emergence of a globally oriented high-tech sector in India, or the selling of Brazilian television programmes to Portugal."[44] Colonisation may be viewed as globalisation's predecessor, having in its time, in a far more unilateral fashion, unleashed forces across the planet which globalisation is now pushing forward by swifter, more complex and more unpredictable means.

V

In the field of literature, the body of writing known as "postcolonial," and the accompanying criticism, need to be placed in relation to both geopolitical factors (notably globalisation) and other literary concepts (especially postmodernism). "Postcolonial literature" is usually taken to mean the post-independence literature of the former European colonies. Problems of definition immediately arise: if the postcolonial core certainly consists of the literature of those countries which, beginning with India and Pakistan, have become independent from the colonial powers since the end of World War II, "postcolonial literature" is not by that token necessarily synonymous with "third-world" or "developing-country" literature, since writing from certain countries which are considered first-world and gained independence rather

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[40] Giddens, *Runaway World* (1999, new edition 2002), 19.
[41] Hobsbawm, *The New Century* (2000), 64-66.
[42] Kellner, "Globalization and the Postmodern Turn" (1998),
<www.gseis.ucla.edu/courses/ed253a/dk/GLOBPM.htm>.
[43] Kellner, loc. cit.
[44] Giddens, 16-17.

earlier, such as Canada and Australia, is often also considered postcolonial. There is also the question of Latin American literature, which many, taking political and economic factors into account, class as postcolonial despite the fact that nearly all the region's republics have been independent states for nearly two centuries. Postcolonial literature includes writing in both endogenous languages and European languages (English, French, Spanish, Portuguese), the latter category typically having a higher market and critical profile.

The relationship between postcolonial writing and literary postmodernism is a vexed question. Silvia Albertazzi ("Postcoloniale/Postmoderno," 2001) argues in favour of a clear distinction, based on the presumed different ideological positions of first-world postmodernists and third-world postcolonial writers: "If the fiction writers of the postmodern write to save their lives, the postcolonial tale-tellers write to save their country, their people, rewriting history from the viewpoint of the losers and the dominated." She thus contrasts the ideological commitment of postcolonial writers with what she calls the "end-of-the-world rhetoric" of the metropolitan postmodernists; while admitting that the two modes have certain elements in common (narrative self-consciousness; rewriting of history; interrogation of the canon), she nonetheless insists on a sharp (and ultimately political) distinction between postcolonial and postmodern.[45] A rather different view, leaving room for an intermediate, "both-and" space, is taken by Michael Hensen and Mike Petry ("'Searching for a Self': Postmodernist Theories of Identity and the Novels of Salman Rushdie," 2003), who state that "the discourses of postcolonialism need not necessarily be read as strictly opposed to each other." They argue that, certainly in the particular case of Rushdie, "the supposed gap between postmodernism and postcolonialism is quite easily bridged," with the postcolonial-cum-postmodern writer embodying "a fruitful in-betweenness" and occupying a "powerful 'third space' between one's own and the Other's culture'".[46] Rushdie, as an Indian-born British citizen now resident in the US whose writing is marked by metanarrative concerns and the urge to rewrite history while also focusing on concrete questions of subcontinental identity, is a clear case of the kind of hybridation that can generate such an in-between status. Indeed, at different stages of his career, the protean novelist who could produce both *Midnight's Children* and *The Satanic Verses* has been lionised by some as a third-world spokesman and vilified by others as a traitor to his roots.

A parallel, if less dramatic, position is occupied by other "Indo-Anglian" expatriates or semi-expatriates, even if they have avoided the discursive extremes attaching to Rushdie. One may here think of Amitav Ghosh and Vikram Chandra, both novelists with one foot in India and the other in the West (Chandra has described himself as a "frequent flyer"), whose work - interrogating fixed concepts of identity and history and crossing and recrossing genre frontiers - is best read as simultaneously postcolonial and postmodern. Another writer of "in-between" or "both-and" characteristics, V.S. Naipaul - born in Trinidad, of Indian origin and today resident in Britain - has, in his most recent novel, *Half A Life*, produced a metafictional, self-reflexive work with clear postmodern characteristics.

Writing on Chandra, Dora Sales Salvador proposes an approach that goes beyond both Silvia Albertazzi's either-or model and the Hensen-Petry notion of an in-between space. Her essay "Vikram Chandra's Constant Journey: Swallowing the World" (2000), starting out from the position that through what is called postcolonial writing, "centres and peripheries have been

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[45] Albertazzi, "Postcoloniale/Postmoderno" (2001), 116 and *passim* (my translation).
[46] Hensen and Petry, "'Searching for a Self'" (2003), 127-129.

redefined,"[47] proposes, as a conceptual alternative, the rather different notion of "transculturation":

> Lately (…) the term and concept of "postcolonialism" is itself being sharply interrogated. In any case, I prefer to speak about transcultural narratives, using a terminology and conceptualization taken from Latin American criticism (...) The transcultural identity is not predicated upon the idea of the disappearance of independent cultural traditions, but rather on their continual and mutual development. Some features are lost, and some others are gained, producing new forms even as older ones continue to exist. Transculturation is a hybrid process that is constantly reshaping and replenishing itself.[48]

The transculturation approach supersedes the centre/periphery topography of the first-world/third-world model, implying the simultaneous existence of multiple centres and a complex web of multidirectional processes. It would also be compatible with Giddens' notion of "reverse colonization," and would account for the recent, and remarkably successful, invasion of the Anglophone market for substantive fiction by a whole host of talented writers with Indian or South Asian names. Under a multi-centred transculturation model, postmodernist and postcolonial modes would not be incompatible, and to identify multiple forms of hybrid writing would be perceived as fully legitimate.

The debates are further complicated by the frequent linking of postcolonial or "third-world" fiction with the mode of writing known as "magic realism." The magic-realist mode - defined by a representative work of reference as "the mingling and juxtaposition of the realist and the fantastic"[49] - is particularly associated with Latin American literature and Indian writing in English. It introduces fantastic or fairy-tale-like elements (say, second sight, invisibility or shape-changing) within a largely realist narrative framework. One could argue that magic realism is as old as the *Thousand and One Nights*, but its contemporary theory and practice are generally traced back to Alejo Carpentier's novel of 1949, *The Kingdom of This World* (*El Reino de este mundo*) - set in nineteenth-century Haiti and impregnated with Afro-Caribbean magical symbolism - and to the author's preface to that novel. In his preface, Carpentier speaks of the "marvellous real" ("lo real maravilloso") in the following terms:

> (…) the story about to be read has been established on the basis of a highly rigorous documentation which … respects the historic truth of the events … And yet, through the dramatic singularity of the occurrences, through the fantastic features of the characters (…), everything appears as marvellous in a story which could not have been set in Europe, but which is nonetheless as real as any of the exemplary events of an educationally edifying nature to be found in school textbooks. But what is the entire history of Latin America but a chronicle of the marvellous real?[50]

Carpentier implies that the particular nature of Latin American reality is most appropriately communicated through fictional means that diverge to a greater or lesser extent from classical realism. Even if Carpentier's own Cuba was in 1949 an independent state, *The Kingdom of This World* appears as an early and canonic instance of the postcolonial novel, coinciding in its moment of publication with the onset of the great wave of European decolonisation and

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[47] Sales Salvador, "Vikram Chandra's Constant Journey" (2000), 2.
[48] Sales Salvador, loc. cit., 4.
[49] Cuddon, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (1992), 522 (entry 'Magic Realism').
[50] Carpentier, preface to *El Reino de este mundo* (1949), 11-12 (my translation).

narrating both the potential and the contradictions of the pre- and post-independence travails of Haiti, the modern world's first black republic. Carpentier's notion of the "marvellous real" as a privileged mode for narrating developing-world realities has had a rich afterlife. In Latin America, magic realism has dominated in, say, the novels and stories of Gabriel García Márquez (most famously in *One Thousand Years of Solitude*) and the post-Borgesian fictions of Julio Cortázar, while in Indo-Anglian writing it is exemplified, in the first place by Rushdie (in *Midnight's Children* and its successors), but also in major novels by Chandra (*Red Earth and Pouring Rain*) and Ghosh (*The Circle of Reason*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*).

It needs to be stressed, however, that while the three genres - postcolonial, postmodern and magic-realist - may converge or coincide in certain writers and works, the overlap, while real, is imperfect. Not all postcolonial fiction is magic-realist, nor is all magic-realist fiction postcolonial; equally, some but not all postcolonial writing is simultaneously postmodernist. If we take Indian writing in English, the bulk of Rushdie's production may be fairly located within all three categories at once, but Vikram Seth's celebrated novel *A Suitable Boy*, while undoubtedly postcolonial in a very literal sense (narrating the immediate post-independence period in India), is most certainly neither magic-realist nor postmodernist: in fact, it perfectly exemplifies the imitation of the nineteenth-century masters deplored by Barth. Anita Desai's preference is for the realist mode, and much the same may be said of Arundhati Roy or Jhumpa Lahiri. Meanwhile, the most recent fictions of both Chandra (*Love and Longing in Bombay*) and Ghosh (*The Glass Palace*) suggest that their authors are in process of moving away from magic realism, perhaps altogether. In Europe, the works of José Saramago - as in the magical-historical *Baltasar and Blimunda* (*Memorial do Convento*), written in Carpentier's footsteps, or the dark entropic fantasy of *Blindness* (*Ensaio sobre a Cegueira*) - may for the most part certainly be termed both postmodernist and magic-realist, but, given that Saramago is a citizen of one former colonial power (Portugal) now resident in the territory of another (Spain), his fictional production can hardly be called postcolonial.

It does not, then, seem to make sense to place the fictions of metropolitan postmodernists like Barth and Pynchon in a strict or rigid opposition to the postcolonial or magic-realist work of writers from the periphery. As US citizens, not to mention WASPS, the two are by definition no more postcolonial than Portugal's Saramago: nonetheless, their work does bear traces of the colonial experience, and, besides, there are direct lines of contact between the two American writers and postcolonial or magic-realist literature. The German colonial heritage in South-West Africa (now Namibia) is a recurring presence in *Gravity's Rainbow*; *The Sot-Weed Factor*, Barth's postmodern re-write of the colonial past of his native Maryland, has its genesis in the satiric poem of 1708 of the same name by Ebenezer Cook, one of the first works of literature to turn the spotlight on British colonialism in America.[51] One of the most distinguished alumni of Barth's creative writing course at Johns Hopkins is Vikram Chandra, whose own fictional re-creation of Indian colonial history, in *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, may owe something to his instructor's example. In 1989, Pynchon published a laconic (61-word) but unambiguous declaration of support, post-*Satanic Verses*, for Rushdie, praising the anathematised novelist for "reminding us again that power is as much our sworn enemy as unreason".[52] His beleaguered fellow writer returned the favour a year later with an enthused review of *Vineland*,[53] which, if one reads between the lines, points to Thomas Pynchon as a

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[51] Ebenezer Cook, "The Sot-Weed Factor; or a Voyage to Maryland: A Satyr" (1708), republished with introduction by Arthur Kay (1998), at: <darkwing.uoregon.edu/~rbear/ren.htm.>.
[52] Pynchon, "Words for Salman Rushdie," (1989), 29; republished at: <www.themodernword.com/pynchon/pynchon_essays_rushdie.html>.
[53] See Rushdie, "Thomas Pynchon" (1990).

direct influence on Salman Rushdie's own writing. The collapsing universes of Rushdie's *Grimus* or *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* certainly seem to owe something to Pynchon's entropic cosmos, while the ever-shifting identity and multiple selves of Saleem Sinai, the narrator of *Midnight's Children*, offer curious parallels with the decentred narrators of Barth's first two novels. The connections also splay out into Latin American literature: paralleling Barth's avowed interest in Borges, Pynchon, in 1988, uncharacteristically offered the world a detailed and appreciative review praising the artistry of García Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera (El Amor en los tiempos del cólera)*.[54] Lines of contact between the US postmodern and the so-called peripheral literatures are, then, certainly, not wanting.

It is significant that the present study of the Barth/Pynchon postmodern first sees the light of day in India, following on the heels of earlier publications by Dr Ravichandran on, respectively, the two postmodern writers and the general problems of teaching postmodern texts.[55] The ever-closer economic links between India and the US (by no means only in the latter's favour); the vanguard role now played in the world economy by India in such cutting-edge sectors as IT, telecoms, pharmaceuticals and, increasingly, biotech; the high-profile presence in Indian writing in English of members of the Indo-American diaspora; and the existence in Hyderabad of the world's largest research institute for American Studies centre outside the US itself[56]: all these, in today's globalised and globalising context, are live factors that underwrite the interest of dialogue between the Indian postcolonial and the American postmodern.

VI

One final theme remains to be discussed, and that is the relationship of postmodernism to tradition. The postmodern movement, as exemplified by Barth and Pynchon, is not necessarily inimical to the literary or the historical tradition as they are generally understood. Taking all things as grist to its mill, the postmodern text assimilates, problematises and rewrites the tradition, much as it does with more contemporary material: but it cannot do without that tradition, for a Barth or Pynchon is as much a bearer of the constitutive human need for narrative as the author of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The Barthian or Pynchonian narrator is, certainly, one who observes himself in the act of narrating, as in the following formulation of Barth's from the story "CLICK":

> … what are you, and what am I -- in short, what is the self itself -- if not what has been aptly called a 'posited center of narrative gravity' that, in order to function in and not be overwhelmed by the chaotically instreaming flood of sense data, continuously notices, ignores, associates, distinguishes, categorizes, prioritizes, hypothesizes, and selectively remembers and forgets; that continuously spins trial scenarios, telling itself stories about who it is and what it's up to, who others are and what they're up to; that finally is, if it is anything, those continuously revised, continuously edited stories?[57]

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[54] Pynchon, "The Heart's Eternal Vow: A Review of Gabriel García Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*" (1988), at: <www.themodernword.com/pynchon/pynchon_essays_cholera.html>. Barth too has heaped high praise on the Colombian writer, as witness his remarks on *Cien años de soledad* [*One Hundred Years of Solitude*] in "The Spanish Connection" (1984) (15).

[55] See Ravichandran, "Interpreting the Postmodern Maladies" and "Teaching a Postmodern Text" (both 2002).

[56] See Ramakrishna, "Perspectives on American Studies in India" (2002).

[57] Barth, "CLICK," loc. cit.

Nonetheless, this metanarrative element, or sense of watching-oneself-writing, is far from being new in literature - Cervantes did something similar in *Don Quixote*, and so too did Henry Fielding in *Tom Jones* [58]- and on closer inspection both writers' work reveals close links to a much older literary lineage.

Thomas Pynchon's very name is, curiously, almost the same as that of the fictional Pyncheon family whose destiny looms over a classic work of American literature from 1851, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*. His writing - despite the mass-cultural and televisual references to which Dr Ravichandran has ably drawn attention for the text of *Vineland* - does not exclude more "traditional" knowledge from its encyclopaedic grasp: he is quite capable of ferreting in obscure corners of Habsburg history, parodying Jacobean drama, or quoting Rainer Maria Rilke or the Argentinian poets José Hernández and Leopoldo Lugones. John Barth has named, in the context of his *Tidewater Tales*, the four books that "have most influenced his own writing" as being *The Thousand and One Nights, The Odyssey, Don Quixote,* and *Huckleberry Finn* - pillars of the canon one and all;[59] he found the germ of *The Floating Opera* in the historical "Captain James Adams's Original Floating Theatre," from the showboat tradition of the American South;[60] in *The Sot-Weed Factor*, he pastiches the eighteenth-century novel wholesale. Indeed, in these two writers' hands the postmodern novel scarcely seems compatible at all with some of the cruder "educational" attitudes of recent times, such as the sub-utilitarian discourse of vocationalism or the half-baked ideology of "relevance." The corrosive irony and shifting identities of the postmodern mode do not dissociate these fictions from what was written or what happened in the past; and this Janus-faced quality of the Barth or Pynchon text may, indeed, render it particularly suitable for study in the environment of today's "new India," with its citizenry pulled in contradictory directions as resurgent tradition and high-tech modernity fight out the battle for the nation's soul.

VII

I now wish to conclude on a more personal note. In 1984, I attended a conference, not somewhere in Orwell's Oceania but in the rather more enjoyable location of Málaga, on the coast of Andalusia in southern Spain. It was the Eighth Conference of the AEDEAN (the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies), and the two star guests, sharing a platform at the main plenary session, were Salman Rushdie and John Barth. Rushdie's celebrity in those pre-*Satanic Verses* times was still confined to the world of those who read books (including his). He was promoting *Shame*, which had recently appeared, and spoke mostly on the relationship between his own writing and the politics of Pakistan. Years later, with those innocent days left behind for ever, he was to revisit Andalusia in his fiction, in the elegiac scenes set in Granada of his novel of 1995, *The Moor's Last Sigh*. To Barth, I had the privilege of asking a question: I wanted to know whether one of the forbears of the modern novel, François Rabelais, was an influence on his work. He replied that it was a great honour for him to be compared with the author of *Gargantua* - and, indeed, some time later I was pleased to have my insight confirmed when I found the adjective "Rabelaisian" in a passage in chapter five of *The End of the Road*.

That was, I admit, a digression: more important is that Barth's actual address contained a remarkable anecdote, or series of anecdotes, that connected him to a very different writer

[58] Barth has even called Cervantes "the real inventor of postmodern literature" ("The Spanish Connection," 15).
[59] Harris, "Reading John Barth" (2000), <www.centerforbookculture.org/context/no5/harris.html>.
[60] See Barth, "Foreword" to *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road* (1988), vi.

from the tradition, namely Edgar Allan Poe. The link is not fortuitous, for the author of "The Raven" breathed his last in 1849 in a hospital in Baltimore, in Barth's own state of Maryland - an episode that the speaker would himself recall in print in 1997, in his short narrative "CLICK," which, set in that metropolis, speaks of "the city's harbor area, which surely included the erstwhile haunts of (…) Edgar Allan Poe."[61] John Barth's address, later reprinted in the conference proceedings as "The Spanish Connection," centred around the arresting image of a lost-and-found hat - to be precise, a Basque *boina*, or beret, particularly dear to the author. The image, in classically postmodern fashion, took on multiple and shifting forms as Barth's speech evolved before his assembled audience. It took in his own material experience, his own published writing, his own potential or possible writing, Edgar Allan Poe, and, indeed, Thomas Pynchon. The writer told how in 1962 he had lost his hat, blown off his head by a fierce wind, down the famous gorge at Ronda in Andalusia (not far from Málaga, where he was now speaking), and had miraculously found it again at the bottom of the ravine. He told how, in *Sabbatical: A Romance*, his novel of 1982, the character Fenwick Turner loses *his* boina over the side of a sailboat in Chesapeake Bay only to find it again, after running "the obstacle course of the plot," at the farther end of the same bay. He told how, if he were to rewrite that book, he would not let Turner get off so lightly, but would have him "take the long way home", losing the hat like his creator in the gorge at Ronda and regaining it back in Spain only after voyaging "down Guadalevín and the Guadiaro River, to the Mediterranean and out through the Pillars of Hercules to the Gulf of Cádiz; then, like Columbus, westward across the Atlantic to the Caribbean; then … up from the Caribbean to North America, to the Chesapeake, to Maryland - and … at last again to Ronda, where our boinas patiently await our return."[62] He told how, when he read *Gravity's Rainbow*, he was eerily reminded of his own "boina story" by the incident in which Pynchon's character Lieutenant Slothrop loses his precious harmonica down the plumbing in New York City, to recover it, out of the blue, some half-dozen years and 600 pages later, while "wandering through the wreckage of Germany." He described this episode as "one of the bright moments of contemporary North American storytelling - indeed, of the literature we call Postmodern," and, bravely linking Pynchon to Poe and the postmodern to the past, threw out the following daring connection: "it [the harmonica] has surfaced in Germany as mysteriously as Edgar Poe's hero Arthur Gordon Pym surfaces in New York City after disappearing into the abyss at the South Pole."[63]

Barth was referring to *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, the novel of "incredible adventures and discoveries" published by Edgar Allan Poe in 1838. In *Pym*, the Boston-born writer gave voice to the then-popular theory of "Symmes' Hole." According to this hypothesis, launched on the world in 1818 by one John Cleve Symmes of St Louis, Missouri, the earth was hollow at both poles, and an intrepid explorer could enter the planet's entrails at the South Pole and reappear safe and sound at the North Pole. Poe's book starts with a "preface," "signed" and "dated" thus: "A.G. PYM. New York, July, 1838." It is generally believed that the fictional Pym, who as the novel ends plunges into an abyss at the southern pole, must, inside his "narrative," have made his way back to the United States (where he is said to have passed his story on to "Mr Poe") through "Symmes' Hole" - emerging in the polar waters and, probably, returning home via Canada. One-and-a-half centuries later, on a lecture platform in Spain, John Barth revived an old hypothesis in a contemporary form, bringing his own novelist's imagination to bear on his predecessor's invention as he told the expanding tale of Pynchon's reappearing harmonica and his own resurrecting hat.

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[61] Barth, "CLICK," loc. cit.
[62] Barth, "The Spanish Connection" (1984), 10.
[63] Barth, op. cit., 7, 8.

In retrospect, I submit that the adventures spun by Barth around his hat today appear as something more than just another American tall tale. The image of "Symmes' Hole," as exploited fictionally by Poe and taken up by Barth, must surely strike the twenty-first-century reader as no mere pseudo-scientific conceit: it now looks like a compelling symbol of globalisation. A message sent from a computer screen at one end of the earth can now re-emerge on a screen at the other extremity of the globe: Symmes' hollow earth becomes the emblem of a radically interconnected, global consciousness. A study of American postmodernism, written and published in India, now has the opportunity to reverberate around the world. And it is with that hope, and in that spirit, that I now invite the reader to embark on the discovery of the fictional universes of John Barth and Thomas Pynchon, equipped with the admirable map which Dr Ravichandran has most capably placed at our disposal.

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