PYNCHON NOTES
A Newsletter
3 June, 1980

Editors
Bibliography:
John M. Krafft
Suffolk County Community College
Western Campus
Brentwood, NY 11717

News:
Khachig Tololyan
English Department
Wesleyan University
Middletown, CT 06457

Copyright 1980 by John M. Krafft and Khachig Tololyan

RECENT WORKS:

Mentions Pynchon.


(117, 134-35)

Brief remarks about Gravity's Rainbow.


Marquez, Antonio. Rev. of Pynchon: Creative Paranoia in Gravity's Rainbow by Mark Richard Siegel. Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature, 33, No. 2 (1979), 82.


RECENT PAPERS:


FORTHCOMING WORKS:


MEETING:

"Teaching Pynchon to Undergraduates," proposed
special session for the 1980 MLA Convention, was not approved.

NOTES AND QUERIES:

In response to Javaid Qazi's "Source Materials for Thomas Pynchon's Fiction: An Annotated Bibliography" in PN 2, Mark Siegel offers the following additional suggested sources.


Here and in A Letter to American Teachers of History, Adams proposes that the analysis of energy and the Second Law of Thermodynamics be applied to all social phenomena. Like Pynchon in V. and "Entropy," Adams suggests that all the world's energies, physical and societal, are being degraded to lower levels and will finally be unusable.


This standard text (which Pynchon is likely to have used at Cornell) contains an explanation of the Poisson Distribution, illustrated with the distribution of "Flying Bomb Hits on London" during World War II (150-52).

Likewise, T. S. Tillotson writes:

Some readers might be interested by indexed references to George Kingsley Zipf and his empirical law as it applies to lexicographic trees and to the temperature of discourse. These references are provided by Benoit B. Mandelbrot in Fractals: Form, Chance, and Dimension (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1977). Mandelbrot describes Zipf's book, Human Behavior and the Principle of Least Effort thus:

"I know very few books in which so many flashes of genius, projected in so many directions, are lost in so thick a gangue of wild notions and extravagance. On the one hand it includes a chapter dealing with the shape of sexual organs and another in which the Anschluss of Austria into Germany is justified by means of a mathematical formula. . . ."
Pynchon's Anti-Quests

Mark Siegel

The quest pattern is one of the most venerable literary paradigms of human development, both psychological and social. All three of Pynchon's novels make overt use of the quest pattern, generally depicting the inadequacy of the traditional pattern to abet or develop a consciousness capable of restoring the individual and his world to productive harmony. In effect, Pynchon has played a major role in establishing a fictional pattern I will call the Anti-Quest.

Traditionally, the quest has involved three phases: separation and departure of the quester from his "normal" life (and therefore from his previous selfhood as well as his social context); initiation of the quester into mysteries governing social and psychological being (including the difficulty of differentiating good and evil, of understanding manifestations of the spiritual world and man's relation to them, and of reconciling conflicting forces within the individual's psyche, often dramatized in confrontations with a father figure or alter ego); and the return of the quester with his awards of personal growth and social salvation (the restitution of harmony). Stencil, Profane, Oedipa, Slothrop, and other Pynchon characters all assume the standard posture of questers at the starting gate. All of these characters evoke expectations that their fictions will involve personal growth and social salvation. All of these questers, in one way or another, imitate the behavior of traditional, successful questers encountering initiatory situations, yet none of them "succeed," that is, return

* A more detailed explanation of this concept, its sources, variations, and appearance in contemporary literature and film, will appear in my book-in-progress, The Anti-Quest: American Narrative in the Seventies. There I argue that the anti-quest is one of the major fictional paradigms of narrative art in the 1970's.
home with even the decidedly bitter fruits of those quests. While I have often argued that, for Pynchon, the act of questsing is itself the affirmation of human existence, Pynchon nowhere suggests that any particular quest which would accomplish the traditional task of personal and social reintegration even can be found. The quests of his heroes or anti-heroes are really anti-quests, movements away from rather than toward reunification of the quester and his society. Furthermore, fulfillment of these quests—could they be fulfilled—would not justify the original quest but would negate the true meaning of the tasks for the questers. Finally, it is not clear that these characters achieve much growth in self-knowledge, especially on the conscious level. They affirm their existences but gain little information or power that can be put to constructive use.

In V., Profane and Stencil are rather obvious models of two basic types of quest heroes. Profane, like Tom Jones, Moll Flanders, and other picaresque figures, isn't even aware that he is on a quest. While the growth of Tom Jones occurs primarily on a subconscious, experiential level, he does return home knowing he is better equipped to assume his social duties and personal responsibilities. Profane fails to find a home, in any of the emotional or metaphysical or social senses, and is last seen running "through the abruptly absolute night, momentum alone carrying [him] toward the edge of Malta..." Of his "fabulous experiences" he reports, "offhand I'd say I haven't learned a goddamn thing." Certainly Profane has ridden the road of trials, and his in many ways repetitious experiential "lessons" would normally be the dramatization of the quester's growth. Many critics have noted that the negation of Profane's quest stems from his failure to recognize the "sacred" in his "profane" environment. Events in a quest are often important because they serve as operative symbols for spiritual energies (on the level of either plot or theme), and Profane, in his dealings with SHOCK and SHROUD for instance, prefers to interpret these apparently important manifestations merely as horrible nightmares. On the other hand, Pynchon himself, in all his work, may be indicating that the basic requirements for a successful
quest have been denied modern man: how can one main-
tain faith when it proves again and again to be gulli-
bility? how can one recognize the true from the false
paths with the ambiguity of contemporary road signs?
finally, what if there simply are no answers, no roads
home? In any event, Profane fails to fulfill his
quest either because his instincts fail him, or because
the individual is impotent to overcome the real hard-
ships of the quest and the evils that beset society.
I tend toward the latter conclusion because Pynchon's
other characters, while often sympathetic, never do
succeed. It can be argued that Stencil's failure re-
results in the first place from his manufacturing a
fraudulent quest for himself to fulfill his need for
a quest. However, Stencil has no other options for
personal fulfillment (as far as we know), no other way
of coming to grips with his unfulfilled need for a
home and a sense of identity. Only through the act
of questing can he affirm his existence. While Sten-
cil's futile quest may not seem to make his life
worthwhile, and may, in fact, be seen to be a denial
of historical and political reality as those are
usually conceived, his sense of his quest seems un-
deniably necessary for his psychological balance.
Like many questers, he seeks atonement with his father,
that is, both his biological and his historical pro-
genitors; but, as for all Pynchon's anti-questers, the
goal of "home" is necessary but illusory, and any gains
Stencil has made are not constructive towards achieving
the traditional end of the quest.

At first, Oedipa in The Crying of Lot 49 is on the
apparently traditional quest for self-knowledge and
restitution of her meaningful place in society. Since
she engages our sympathy, is extremely adaptable and
open to experience at the start of the novel, is
filled with dissatisfaction and determination, and
seems to have a conscious recognition of her aims, her
failure to make much headway by the end of the novel
seems rather damning to the notion that any quest can
be successful. Edward Mendelson and I (and a few
other critics) have taken exception to the common
opinion that Pynchon is ridiculing the notion of
questing, because Oedipa remains a sympathetic
character throughout the novel, because she's easily preferable to any of the alternative characters who ridicule her quest, and because the quest itself has not so much failed as evolved into something else, into what I've called the anti-quest. It's not likely that she'll unravel the legacy of her father figure, Pierce Inverarity, nor find a home worth returning to (Mucho has cracked up), but she has learned that she needs to affirm human life. This is described in particular in her epiphany with the sailor and his DTs, where she confronted "change . . . for what it was, . . . where death dwelled in the cell though the cell be looked in on at its most quick." She knows the value of each individual's life—-not much, but all there is. For Oedipa, there are no solutions to this paradox, and while she achieves a degree of knowledge about herself and her place in the universe, it is not certain or even helpful knowledge but only an infinite series of irreducible probabilities that leads her not home but further and further away from her origins. Therefore there can be no return, but only an unending anti-quest.

Gravity's Rainbow presents a series of characters on various quests. Slothrop is questing for his personal identity and, coincidentally, the identity of our age. Like Profane's, his failure may be due to his own inadequacies, but again we see that he is confronted by natural and historical forces that turn him away from the quest, that deny the possibility of its fulfillment. In the end, his disintegration may be interpreted as a final reintegration with the forces of the physical universe, but the very harmony thus achieved negates any chance for psychological or social reunification. Furthermore, his giving up his quest in this way marks his departure from life as we know it; the continuous trial of the anti-quest, the task of affirmation, has been too much for him. Enzian and Tchtcherine are questing for the OOOOO, and coincidentally for their personal identities. The Hereros have no home, and their myth of return, once cyclical, like all quest patterns, now seems to dead end or lead infinitely toward death. This final escape from rather than reintegration with society is another anti-quest. Blicero sees all cyclical patterns, including
quest patterns, as impossible to achieve on a physical level because the world's natural course has been disrupted. As "the father you never quite managed to kill," he is just one of a number of apparently insurmountable obstacles incorporated within the psyche of the quester that prevent the quester from achieving his traditional goal of reunification.

Stories of the completed quest give their readers a sense of satisfaction. The quest validates the sense of unity of experience and values and seems to be a psychological necessity for human beings who must face a daily life. Furthermore, the traditional quest pattern explains the relationship of the individual's present to his past and future, anchoring him comfortably if superficially. Pynchon's writing career so far has exemplified the anguish caused by the contemporary sense of fragmentation of experience and values, the confusion and futility of attempting to understand the connections of past-to-present-to-future by traditional means. Only the process of questing, the reflex of the self in search of itself, provides hope and makes life bearable. The anti-quest is the fictional pattern that acknowledges our present fragmentation as well as our eternal need.

University of Wyoming

In turning down the Pynchon session, the MLA has provided a reminder of the importance of critical exchange in such a context as Pynchon Notes. We hope to receive and to present many short articles and responses and hope that most of the responses will not be homegrown, as is that which follows.
Some Remarks on Professor Mark Siegel's
"Pynchon's Anti-Quests"

Khachig Tololyan

I think Professor Siegel is writing about a real phenomenon. The anti-quest, in various guises, is to be found in much of our literary and filmic fictions of the past two decades. I do have some questions and qualifications.

(1) Professor Siegel writes in a vein of moral pragmatism, by no means unique to him, that I have always found unsettling; it leads one to peculiar assumptions about character. He tells us that the anti-quest is characterized by the denial of growth and self-knowledge to the characters, who can affirm "their existences but gain little information or power that can be put to constructive use."

A phrase like "constructive use" marks what I call moral pragmatism, which is dominated by the assumption that characters are, somehow, like people, have experiences, learn from them, grow, and become constructive members of the textual community. I don't mean to accuse Professor Siegel of naiveté; he knows as well as I that characters are not people, or even—at least in Pynchon's work—realistic imitations of people. Yet he writes as though he has forgotten the essential use to which a writer puts his characters: they do not suffer for themselves, but for us, the readers, and in so far as our instruction is concerned, their failures are every bit as relevant as their successes might be, say in classic comedy or in cheerful bildungsromans. Even in some of the most traditional and moralizing fictions of the nineteenth century, which demanded the doling out of reward and punishment to the characters at fiction's end, few good novelists made the mistake of supposing that what happened in a novel happened to or for the characters: it happened to the readers, if it happened at all.

Trollope's Can You Forgive Her? is as cravenly bourgeois a novel as a great novelist can produce, with reward and punishment duly apportioned according to the dictates of mid-Victorian morality. But even that novel ends, as the title suggests, with an invitation
to the reader to consider his or her own judgment of the female protagonist's behavior, and thus to enact the implied contract between author and reader, to acknowledge the fact that the book has been for the reader all along. In a similar vein, Thackeray's introductory remarks to Vanity Fair disturb readers even now, not because they are old-fashioned but precisely because they make explicit the subservience of character, which there is a tendency--indeed a guilty desire--to forget, as it seems to me Professor Siegel has done.

Let me try to anticipate the objection that I am quibbling. The character who fulfills a quest and returns home, say in the nostos that closes the Odyssey, is made to do so by an author who believes that such a completion will best serve not just the traditional, inherited Greek tales, but also his purpose, which is oriented towards making a structure that will generate the meanings he intends--among other meanings, over which he will have no control. Of course, a closure such as the Odyssean nostos tends to serve comedies best, and to seem less fitting for tragedies. The Iliad, where Western literature's tragic sense of life is first developed, is also about the impossibility of returning "home". Not only will Achilles not go back to the land of the Akhaians, but he cannot even move back into the encampment of the Greek warriors in a way that will satisfy. The Iliad is the first narrative that "tells" us that we can't go home again, especially when "home" is thought of not just geographically, but also as that Utopian place where innocence is only improved by experience, where learning and wisdom are accretive and not alienating. There is no returning to the pre-lapsarian world after the quest of the Odyssey, either--it is too sly and ironic a text for that. Ithaka, like Pynchon's Malta, is there as geography but not quite as a place of satisfaction and permanent restfulness. The Odyssey stands in relation to the Iliad as V. stands vis-à-vis Gravity's Rainbow, in this as in so many other matters.

Quests, then, like anti-quests and failed quests, have always served to involve the reader, to get him
or her to think about the frustrations of fulfillment. When Lazarillo de Tormes, of the eponymous picaresque, finds a home of sorts after his wanderings, he has experienced much but learned little—alternatively, it can be argued that in order to achieve stillness, he has repressed all he has learned, as Profane may be doing. Be that as it may, we the readers have acquired, by sharing the complicity of narrative tone with the author, a corrosively ironic stance towards the possibilities that the novel depicts. The completion of a successful quest is here limited to the most mundane level of plot, which is undercut by our perception of its meaning.

The opposite is also possible. Joyce's Ulysses ends with husband and wife uncoupled, asleep head-to-toe, "Odysseus" having failed to attach "Telemachus" to his household or to guard his conjugal rights. Yet the "yes" at the end is not merely an affirmation of Molly's life—she has none, she is black marks on white. It is an affirmation all the same, one that Joyce hopes we will endorse, of the value of Leopold Bloom's wanderings through the geographic labyrinth of Dublin and through the symbolically, allusively evoked labyrinth of Western culture. This is even more apparent in Finnegans Wake, where the nostos is verbal, not geographical, and where the last sentence requires for its completion a return to the first page of the book. Wakes are not ordinarily vehicles for quest journeys; they seem to cry out for anti-quests down Lethe, if they invite any mobility at all. By splitting his final sentence as he does, Joyce's guided tour through a cosmos of his own devising underscores once again the reader-oriented nature of quests: only the reader can end the quest, satisfactorily or otherwise, and, for Joyce at least, all reading is a quest.

I am suggesting, then, that Professor Siegel's move from quest to anti-quest is too abrupt, and is dictated by the too-narrow way in which he defines the possibilities of the quest. There are comic and tragic quests, and the latter have been with us almost as long as the former. In both kinds of quests we find heroes who do not find what they seek—
heroines, like Oedipa. They do not find what they seek for Self or for Society. Or they find it too late, and can only respond by blindness or a form of suicide. Or they find it, and cannot bring it back to help any other character or society in the narrative. But always, they fail—as they succeed—for us, the readers.

(2) I want to take exception to that remark in which Professor Siegel attributes a special ambiguity to "contemporary road signs". Great quest narratives have always been more tricky and less easily meaningful than he credits them with being. For example, an allegorical narrative like The Faerie Queene can be interpreted woodenly, by the assignment of one-to-one correspondences to its signifiers, but a generation of scholarship has shown how reductive that is. If the anti-quest exists and is more popular today than ever before, as Professor Siegel claims, it is not because meaning is harder to find and more ambivalent today than ever before, or the mysteries more mysterious. Ask Oedipus; he made the same mistake Professor Siegel does, I think. He thought he'd plumbed the riddle of the Sphinx the first time around.

(3) I mentioned, as does Professor Siegel, that much of Pynchon's fiction is concerned with the "you can't go home again" motif. I just want to add here that Pynchon owes more to the formulation of this in German poetry and philosophy than we have yet recognized. Unheimlich is a term that has been important at least since Hölderlin, and has been of special significance to Rilke and Heidegger. It means "not-at-home-ness," not belonging in a context and therefore, by a simple extension, "uncanny." The Herero can't go back to the Southwest, nor Slothrop to the Berkshires; the not-at-homeness is global in Gravity's Rainbow; it has been planetized, and the symbol of that globalization is the V-2. A camera mounted on one of its successors gave us the photograph of the cool blue sphere that has become the emblem of ecologists everywhere, while the ICBMs which are also descendants of the V-2 have tentacled the same globe with the possibility of a nuclear death which the end of Gravity's Rainbow rehearses. In such a world,
no one is at home, and every place is a theater of war.

(4) Finally, I want to acknowledge the importance that Professor Siegel imparts to the notion of fatherhood in Pynchon's work. It is not only Stencil, I would add, who has doubts about his father. Of course, his story leaves us with no doubts that he is his century's child, yet father-child bonds are hard to find and even harder to maintain--both for the characters in Pynchon's novels, and for the reader-detectives who peruse them for genealogy. It is no easier to go home to earthly fathers, in Pynchon's fiction, than to the Heavenly father. There are copulations aplenty, and occasional motherly women, but fathers are as scarce as Home. These two absences are central to Pynchon's work, and they are parallel to each other--indeed, they are the tracks along which the narrative moves, occasionally switching to a spur, like Skippy's train. In such a situation, when the world is our only home, the more parochial homes to which the quester would return are not possible--indeed, were it possible to find such parochial homes, characters and especially readers would be able to resist Pynchon's claim that there is only one global home. Similarly, parent-child bonds are evanescent in Pynchon's fiction precisely because he wants us to attend to a harder truth, namely, that like Slothrop we are all the children of a society, a technocracy, a power-structure whose influence in shaping us is disproportionately larger than that of our biological progenitors. For Oedipa, as Professor Siegel says, Pierce is the founding father--and for that reason, I would add, he cannot be found, like all the objects of Pynchonian quests.

Wesleyan University
Bibliography

ODDMENTS BY PYNCHON:


BOOKS, CHAPTERS, ESSAYS, ARTICLES, FRAGMENTS, ETC. WHOLLY OR PARTLY ABOUT PYNCHON:


Boheemen-Saaf, Christel van. "The Artist as Con Man: The Reaction Against the Symbolist Aesthetic in Recent American Fiction." Dutch Quarterly Review of Anglo American Letters,
7 (1977), 305-18. (309-11)
Discusses V.


Provides glimpses of Pynchon.

Attacks Gravity's Rainbow.

Discusses V.

Mentions Pynchon and Gravity's Rainbow.

Dismisses Pynchon.


Discusses Pynchon.


Discusses V.


Discusses The Crying of Lot 49.


Strehle, Susan. "Black Humor in Contemporary
American Fiction." DAI, 37 (1976), 319A (Berkeley).

Thomas, Brook. "Not a Reading of, but the Act of Reading Ulysses." James Joyce Quarterly, 16, Nos. 1-2 (1978-79), 81-93. (82)

Mentions Gravity's Rainbow.


Discusses V. and The Crying of Lot 49.

Weinstein, Mark A. "The Creative Imagination in Fiction and History." Genre, 9, No. 3 (1976), 263-77. (273-76)

Discusses V.


ITEMS FROM THE POPULAR PRESS:


Mentions Pynchon.

Baker, J. F. "The Awards: High Drama and Low Comedy." Publisher's Weekly, 13 May 1974, 41-44. (44)

Describes the National Book Award ceremony.


Mentions rumor that Pynchon had declined the Howells Medal.


Mentions Gravity's Rainbow and The Crying of Lot 49.


"Immortal Nominations." *New York Times Book Review*, 3 June 1979, 12-13, 51. (13, 51) Two respondents, Donoghue and Hellman, rank *Gravity's Rainbow* among "the most important books of Western literature."


FOREIGN LANGUAGE WORKS ABOUT PYNCHON:


We would like to thank Beverly Clark, Finvola Drury, Geoffrey Green, Jerome Klinkowitz, Don Larsson, Edward Mendelson, Richard Pearce, Penelope Price, Elaine Safer, Mark Siegel, Michael Silverblatt, John Stark, T. S. Tillotson, and Mathew Winston for their contributions to this issue of Pynchon Notes.

Pynchon Notes 4 will feature "The Chymische Hochzeit of Thomas Pynchon" by N. P. George.