PYNCHON NOTES

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ISSN 0278-1891

Pynchon Notes is published three times a year, in February, June, and October.
Subscriptions: $1.50 per single issue, or $4.00 per year. Free to libraries.
Manuscripts, notes and queries, bibliographic information and any other correspondence may be addressed to either editor.
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7    October 1981

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Editorial

As the seventh—and thus far largest—issue of Pynchon Notes goes to press, we are struck by the incongruity that marks the field of Pynchon studies: on the one hand, increasing interest by scholars and non-scholars alike; on the other, stubborn resistance to the acknowledgment and legitimization of that interest by parts of the MLA bureaucracy.

Signs of the growing interest in Pynchon’s work are everywhere, in the number—and improving quality—of books published and about to be published, and in the articles whose appearance the bibliography of Pynchon Notes duly records. The interest is, increasingly, international; it emanates from Germany, Israel, Britain, Japan and France, as the contents of future issues of Pynchon Notes will substantiate. We note the intensity and extent of this interest only to juxtapose it to the resistance manifested once again by the MLA Convention committee, which has refused to approve for the 1981 Convention a seminar proposed by Professors Walter Isle and Gary Thompson. It is the fourth such refusal in four years. Earlier, from 1975 to 1977, when the seminars and special sessions of the MLA reflected to a considerable extent the interests expressed by members of the MLA (as signaled by their signatures on formal petitions), three seminars devoted to Pynchon and organized by one of us (KT) were held; the last of these attracted 135 participants and requests for the papers.

Even as a section of the MLA bureaucracy finds the idea of using the interests of its members to gauge the worthiness of seminars either quaint or threatening, the compilers of the MLA International Bibliography responded in a different manner. Recognizing both the significance of the continued existence of the privately financed Pynchon Notes and the importance of the increasing number of articles that appear in its pages or are recorded in its bibliography, they added this publication to the Master List of Periodicals covered by the MLA Bibliography, where it is referred to by the acronym PNotes.
The editors of Pynchon Notes launched this publication with the hope that, without ghettoizing scholarship about Pynchon's work, it could serve as a forum for the exchange of information and informed opinion. Hoping to encourage similar exchange at the 1981 MLA Convention, we have arranged for an informal meeting, by the courtesy, but without the sanction of the MLA Convention organizers. It will be held on Monday, December 28th, from 6 to 7:15 PM, in Hilton 529. We hope that the occasion will be a lively and friendly one. We have no long agenda, but do hope to spend some twenty minutes on discussion of courses of action that might enable us to organize formal seminars at future MLA conventions. After that, we are looking forward to prolonged socializing. It will be a time, as one contributor to PN wrote recently, for putting faces to the names.

In closing, we note, with some regret, the necessity of charging subscription fees for future issues of PN. Publication costs continue to run ahead of inflation, and the US Postal Service has raised its rates once again. PN has become larger and the list of PN recipients has expanded and come to include overseas scholars; concurrently, our costs have risen to the point where we, and occasional contributions from friends, can no longer meet expenses. We therefore feel obliged to ask for a subscription of $4.00 to cover those expenses in 1982.

JMK, KT
Where Have We Been, Where Are We Headed?:
A Retrospective Review of Pynchon Criticism

Thomas H. Schaub

Reading in Pynchon criticism to date is a good lesson in how irrelevant thematic studies can be to literary scholarship if they are not argued from within an understanding of the fiction, instead of being merely grafted onto it. Writing governs and defines its themes, and the critic must always have the process of the writing securely in mind before proposing to say what the writing means. This is particularly true of Pynchon's writing, which enacts the uncertainties of meaning. Because his books are in many respects about the interpretation of meaning, they resist efforts to impose a consistent pattern upon them. This is especially evident in those efforts which are entirely thematic and which attempt to discern the "message" of Pynchon's work without attending to its medium.

These comments should not be taken as a rejection of the importance of discerning ideas and themes in an author's work. Even though I agree with the spirit behind David Cowart's reminder that we do not read literature to learn about "bleak cosmic truths,"¹ achieving an aesthetic sympathy with or proximity to such truths is one of the impulses for our reading. But such "truth" as an author offers will be distorted unless the reader attends to how ideas appear in the writing. Not to do so results in mistaking a writer's literal use of ideas for other contexts in which those ideas have prominence (philosophy, history, science).

I

Many of the reviews and articles which followed the appearance of Gravity's Rainbow noted the indeterminacies of Pynchon's texts and cautioned against placing too much confidence in any particular idea in them. Though sporadic and undeveloped, these comments were useful and provided leads one expected to be followed in subsequent and lengthier studies. Everywhere in this first round of response one finds important recognitions: how difficult it is to find a consistent moral point of view ("It is almost impossible to
locate the narrator" George Levine writes); how "dizzying and resistant" his style is (writes Richard Poirier in "The Importance of Thomas Pynchon," MP, 16); how the narrator treats elements of his story as "both comic and sinister" (Joseph Slade); how "the affliction of his characters is the condition of his form" (Tony Tanner, MP, 55); and how in The Crying of Lot 49, "Oedipa is poised on the slash between meaning and unmeaning" (Frank Kermode). Such comments as these provide the stymied reader with company and confidence, but too often they remain undeveloped, and the articles pursue a thematic point of view in spite of the stylistic instabilities they have noted. At the time of writing his piece for the Mindful Pleasures collection, Levine had already seen this failing of Pynchon criticism: "critics almost invariably respond to the novels with thematic readings that reduce variety to a fairly conventional coherence" and yet Levine's own essay ("Risking the Moment") succumbs to such a reading, endorsing as it does Leni Pökler's idea of penetrating "the moment" (MP, 126).

It must be granted that the profusion and pressure of ideas in Pynchon's novels are nearly impossible to withstand. In particular, "amateur readers" (in Poirier's phrase) are apt to assume they are reading battles of ideas, and have only to locate the survivors to arrive at Pynchon's "message." This assumption misses the fact that ideas in the imaginative worlds of Pynchon's fiction are as much objects and forces in that world as they are possible explanations of it. Accordingly, our attention has to be upon the interplay of idea, character and action, the bewildering relations and intersections of Pynchon's writing. In his review of Gravity's Rainbow, Richard Poirier noted that "speculative writing abounds in the book, brilliantly bringing together technological and much earlier analytical methods that combine to the eventual distortion of lives" (P, 174). Criticism has tended to research the "technology" rather than unravel the "bringing together." It is this tangle his writing enacts; there we find Pynchon's thematic orientation; and there we may attend to the brilliance of his writing.

In addition to hinting at the problems posed by Pynchon's style, these early pieces mapped a possible
line of inquiry for Pynchon critics. One finds in them the outline of differences of opinion over Pynchon's characterization, the division between those who read Pynchon's work as "Manichaean fantasy" (David Leverenz, MP, 242) and those who insist "at the heart of Pynchon's imagination lies . . . a sense of mystery, a vision of fantasy, that expresses itself in dualisms" (Robert Sklar, P, 91), and the issue of Pynchon's "realism," questions of genre and mode.

There seem to be two tendencies afoot in the efforts to understand Pynchon's narrative mode. One views Pynchon's writing as entirely new and innovative, rejecting positivism, realism and naturalism. The other places Pynchon in a tradition and shows his writing to be a contemporary expression of narrative modes with respectable lineages, generally versions of romance and satire. Perhaps assuming Pynchon's departures from convention to be self-evident, representatives of the former tendency often neglect to argue their position, and confuse the charismatic surface of Pynchon's world with those underlying characteristics which define mode. The latter tendency often implies that Pynchon's motley texts fail to meet the requirements of inherited forms.

Edward Mendelson's "magisterial"(the word is Khachig Tölölyan's) essay, "Gravity's Encyclopedia" captures the best of both tendencies by situating Gravity's Rainbow in a tradition he has newly defined. Mendelson's piece is so successful among Pynchon readers that the genre of "encyclopedic narrative" apparently has been adopted unanimously, for one finds "encyclopedic" used everywhere to describe Pynchon's big book, as if the word, like "Kleenex," had lost its patent. Mendelson's essay exhibits much of what Pynchon criticism needs: a more thorough sense of Pynchon's literary environment (both contemporary and historical); discussion of underlying sources and demonstration of their use; and further prolonged attention to the processes of Pynchon's writing.

Mendelson also marshals the most favorable and articulate understanding, thus far, of Pynchon's characterization. However, he is not alone in noting "Pynchon's characters live in their work and in their relations to large social and economic systems" (MP, 179). Levine states "Pynchon creates character by
imagining it as participating in the energies of the world created around it" (MP, 124); and Michael Seldel argues that Slothrop's character is the result of the narrative mode in which he finds himself: "satiric heroes are victims; they are disallowed the luxury of human choice or even self-determined motive" (P, 201).

Roger Henkle articulates the contrary view, holding Pynchon to the requirements of psychological realism: "Oedipa, in fact, illustrates the failure of Pynchon's characters to carry the heavy themes of his novels" (P, 106). This will seem especially so to those readers for whom Pynchon's style is not the effective bearer of Oedipa's experience, rather than the "heavy themes" she juggles. While Henkle feels that Oedipa fails to "dramatize her own supposed compulsions and needs," Poirier considers "The Crying of Lot 49 an astonishing accomplishment and the most dramatically powerful of Pynchon's works because of its focus on a single figure" (MP, 18).

The issue of character eventually bears upon the issue of genre and mode, for the nature of characters, their experiences and conditions help define the kind of narrative in which they move. For example, Pynchon's handling of Slothrop has been used to demonstrate Pynchon's affinities with romanticism, satire, fantasy, and the gothic novel, as well as a return to the conventions of nineteenth century fiction, albeit "built on an attention to realities ignored by the fiction that we have come to accept as 'realistic'" (Mendelson, P, 5).

II

In the lengthier studies which have followed the articles I have been drawing upon, one is disturbed to find that these central issues have been not so much ignored as assumed. We have yet to receive a convincing discussion showing that Pynchon is "rejecting the realist tradition" (Levine, MP, 123), or that he "seems to reject positivism" (CP, 23), and above all—that he abandons naturalism for "postmodernism." Without careful, extended argument there is no advance. Nor is it idiosyncratic to suggest that character and genre are interesting and essential elements in our understanding of Pynchon's narratives.
Given the need for furthering that understanding, Mark Siegel's Pynchon: Creative Paranoia in Gravity's Rainbow is especially disappointing. Siegel's thesis zigzags around both the areas of characterization and genre, but never establishes a firm point of view which is argued persuasively. Moreover, Siegel's book is not really about "creative paranoia." The phrase is cited and the thesis smuggled in on pages 18 and 19, but is never defined or pursued. The recurring assertions that ought to have formed the backbone to this book all concern another implicit thesis of his discussion: the coherence of Gravity's Rainbow derives from its narrative voice, and this voice belongs to the primary "character" of the novel. This character is a creative paranoid trying to piece together his world (21, 110 and elsewhere). Despite this claim, Siegel also asserts that this narrative voice is "omniscient" (21), which means, one supposes, that he knows everything he knows, which isn't everything.

Siegel may have been led to the idea of narrator-character by a desire to defend Pynchon's characterization (he cites Henkle's article, mentioned above), for he can then argue that at least this central character has a very deep psychology: "seen from this vantage point, the narrator of Gravity's Rainbow is a complete psychological portrait of a modern creative personality" (40). The other characters are "isolated aspects of the narrator himself" (41, also 52 and elsewhere). This psychology is never analyzed (such analysis would unpack the implications of "creative paranoia"), and the thesis has the weakness of tacitly admitting that the other characters (all 365 of them—the count varies) are as insubstantial as Henkle says they are.

A lurking corollary of this thesis places Gravity's Rainbow in the category of self-conscious fiction that does not refer to any world beyond its own: "the narrator . . . has no other illumination beyond the paranoiac structure of his novel" (106). Moreover, this "omniscient" narrator "makes us aware of the fictionalizing process itself" (21). For support of this view Siegel cites the question asked in "War's evensong" during Advent: "Which do you want it to be?" But the self-consciousness of Pynchon's narrator is always directed outward; Pynchon isn't Robert Coover asking us to compose "The Babysitter"
story we like best. Pynchon's question echoes Jessica's sentimentality two pages earlier and is directed at our appetite for the maudlin and our ability to find hope anywhere but in our own responsibilities. Siegel agrees with those who view Pynchon's work as a rejection of naturalism: "Pynchon seems to reject positivism" and therefore "positivistic naturalism" as well (23); here the importance of questions of genre becomes evident, for at stake are the ties between literature and experience which naturalism insists upon. Siegel's view narrows Pynchon's "public function" (Mendelson, p. 5). Gravity's Rainbow, Mendelson writes, "challenges its readers to choose their relation to experience. Either, like the romantics and Modernists, they will project their private aesthetic order onto what they perceive as the malleable or ultimately inaccessible objects of the world, or else they will accept responsibility for and to the order which exists already in the world of which they are an active part" (p. 8).

An enclave of romantic readers is comprised by those for whom Gravity's Rainbow persistently points to a world beyond, which is neither our world, nor the world of the "fallen" text. Following the early rash of MLA mysticism there have appeared the more closely argued positions of Lance Ozier's "Rilkean Transcendence," Joseph Slade's "Escaping Rationalization," and Marcus Smith and Khachig Tölpölyan's "chronometric Now." These positions require a "meta-existence" not subject to the tragic limitations implicit in naturalist writing. By extension, words themselves participate in this naturalist bondage, so that "freedom" itself is but another bar in the "prison-house" of language (from which Pynchon "frees" Slothrop by dissolving his existence-in-words, much as Walter Lantz used to erase Woody Woodpecker).

Mendelson's dichotomy was bridged by Levine in his review of Gravity's Rainbow when he suggested that in the world of this novel "naturalism becomes spiritualism" (p. 182). Levine may have felt he was yoking contraries, but it seems entirely possible to argue that the effect he describes is the result of an intensification of naturalist premises (objectivity, frankness, an amoral attitude toward its material, a philosophy of determinism, a bias toward pessimism,
man as victim of biology and society). Pynchon's psychic life, for example, may seem a bizarre event in a naturalistic world. But, though Pynchon's use of the Adenoid may seem to be a comic-book detail, its role in Pynchon's life conforms to the naturalistic structure of determinism. This incongruity between the mode of surface detail (sometimes burlesque and always faithful to the popular culture of the period) and the mode of the underlying structure (the implications of these details and their roles in plot and characterization) accounts in some measure for the widespread diversity of opinion on Pynchon's narrative genre. Reviewers quickly recognized the hybrid nature of Pynchon's fiction. Poirier and Sklar both commented upon this; and, of course, hybridization is one characteristic of Mendelson's "encyclopedic narrative."

Clearly Pynchon's work is such a mixture, and attending to the overlays and juxtapositions of modes that comprise this mix is one of the essential tasks of Pynchon criticism. At the same time, the fidelity of Gravity's Rainbow to our environment of information and power is too specific and accurate to justify dispensing with the pertinent aspects of the realist and naturalist categories. Even if we were to argue that (for Pynchon) naturalism is a literary convention with philosophical premises denied by Gravity's Rainbow, we should have to say at the same time that the imaginative relevance to our lives of that convention is representative of the price we pay for psychological and social coherence, and that Slothrop's fate is appealing to us only insofar as it is a literary fate with which we have imaginative sympathy.

One source of the anti-naturalist assumption is the narrator's apparent disdain for cause and effect. Slade early distinguished Pynchon's "view of history" as "an unfolding of continuity and connection rather than . . . a train of cause and effect" (TP, 212). Slade's characterization is true, but deceptive, for cause and effect predicates some kind of connectedness. Moreover, the narrator's disdain has more to do with the stance toward the world implied in the cause-and-effect view (the moral and social ramifications of determining causes as a way of being in the world)
than with any philosophical objection to the a priori status of that view. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, there are causes with human intention behind them, and there are causes without such intent. Similarly, there are effects which proceed variously from the absence of intent, from intent, and in spite of intent. Accordingly, there are degrees and versions of determinism. All of these distinctions and others are present in Pynchon's use of cause and effect, but few readers appear to be interested in discussing this concept as it is informed by his writing. The resulting collapse makes Pynchon's work both deceptively simple and unnecessarily mysterious.

Therefore, Pynchon criticism needs to pay further attention to matters of presentation and form, the ways the materials are handled. This necessity exists even in our reading of his earliest fiction. Joseph Slade's chapter on Pynchon's stories, included in Mendelson's collection, remains the most accessible source of comment on the early fiction, though analysis of specific stories has begun to appear. In particular, Slade's discussion of "Entropy" should be complemented by Robert Redfield and Peter L. Hays's "Fugue as a Structure in Pynchon's 'Entropy.'"

The virtue of the Redfield-Hays article is its demonstration of Pynchon's early ability to elaborate story and theme with exquisite technical ease, lacing overt plot with covert formal structures that have a significant bearing upon meaning.

A similar formal accomplishment underlies "Lowlands." Slade argues "the story is essentially static; at the end Flange returns full circle to the fetal state, and the plot does not advance" (p. 76). This view misunderstands the movement of the story and Pynchon's intentions. It would be difficult to argue that Flange grows or changes in any appreciable degree, but the story itself changes considerably. Pynchon has given "Low-lands" an intricate formal structure which is not only a linear descent, but a movement in words that imitates the shape of an hourglass, so that the two halves of the story mirror one another as the story slips through the neck of time into its own (and Flange's) Doppelgänger. The end of the story is an inverted version of its opening: the sea-nymph with child and Flange's entry into her seaworld reverse his earlier ejection from the childless
home. Nerissa's home is described as an underworld counterpart of the cliffhouse. Between the two houses lies the floor of the dump, corresponding to the "low-lands" of the sea. The dump is at once the zero point of the story's geography and the dead center of the story, coming "exactly" midway in its 22-plus pages. This mid-point, in Bolingbroke's shack, is a reprise of the radio shack of Flange's past; and this point is the "neck" of memory through which the story and Flange slip into the apparition of reality, the "other" and earlier self. That is, once below the dump floor, both Flange and the story modulate into a dead-pan articulation of dream, the sea-source of metaphor that has captured Flange's heart. Here Flange regains that younger sea-going self for whom the sea is a woman. Flange's reticence to tell a sea-story (a story about his girl), moreover, is a clever ruse, for the story of the story he refuses to tell is Pynchon's sea-story, "Low-lands." Buried within this fanciful tale of Dennis Flange is the story of Pynchon's early commitment to the reality of fiction. Here, again, attention only to the overt themes of the story misses the ways in which those themes are qualified by the implications of form.

Perhaps because Pynchon's handling of his materials often frustrates the effort to interpret them, critics appear hesitant to pursue the consequences of their own recognition of that handling. Siegel notes Pynchon's "ironic detachment from the literary devices he employs" (CP, 73); Slade suggests "Low-lands" is "an explicit parody of The Wasteland" (P, 73); and David Cowart writes: "by the writing of V., Pynchon had come to regard the Eliot influence with a certain irony" (AA, 10-11). For the most part, however, these and other critics proceed in their discussions as if this stylistic irony—like the refracting medium of water—did not alter everything that passes through it.

This hesitancy results in the reliance upon thematic readings mentioned at the beginning of this essay, and neglects the sensibility conveyed by Pynchon's ironic distortions. Pynchon's independence from the ideas he uses is explicit even in his collegiate story, "The Small Rain." The title, borrowed from A Farewell to Arms, is only the first allusion to the modernist
period that serves as the insufficient intellectual inheritance of the cerebral Levine, the story's major character. On the last page, he is addressed by another character, "'You and Hemingway... Funny, ain't it. T. S. Eliot likes rain.'"

The story is less about the waste land than about a post-World War II sensibility which has inherited the persistence of wasteland conditions, while the armature of modernist alienation which first gave those conditions expression retains no force. This fact recurs in Pynchon's stories and in V. Thus the light-headed Siegel, of "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna," begins to perceive "Deeper Human Significance" in the stories he is told, and Callisto, in "Entropy," realizes "undergraduate cant had been oracle after all."

The irony in which Callisto is trapped is characteristic. These early figures in Pynchon's fiction are all caught in situations which may be described in terms of the modernist vocabulary they inherit. The insufficiency of this inheritance is a difficulty not only for them, but for their author as well, because the received formulations have gone stale while remaining true. Both his early characters and writing struggle within this dissonance, seeking an authentic, original expression. This struggle is the obligation of every artist, but it is magnified by an inherited alienation. That is, because the inheritance provides a set of words (the "wasteland," "the lost generation" and their texts) that has become part of our experience (instead of liberating understandings of it), this legacy has led to contortions in the relations of language and experience. Pynchon's stylistic twisting pursues an ironic strategy in which point of view—like an oscillating wave—exists in the tension between experience and words.

For example, in Profane's last appearance he tells Brenda Wigglesworth he hasn't learned a "goddamn thing" from his experiences. For Profane, words and experience have lost all relation. Stencil is at the other extreme, where words overwhelm mere experience. But these two vectors of experience and words comprise the "wings" of the book's mythic figure, and when they meet on Malta in V.'s penultimate chapter, Pynchon is making available to his readers a unified point of view engendered by their dramatic proximity. Simply,
the reader's perceptions outstrip Profane's and Stencil's limitations. Because the dramatic structure of the book is so visible, V. is a good example of how misleading ideas embedded in one of the book's containing elements can be, unless understood in their dramatic context.

Though confined by strict adherence to the idea of the closed system, William Plater's *The Grim Phoenix* is a very intelligent book, full of information about Pynchon biography and careful research into the factuality behind the metaphors of "entropy" and "tourism." Above all, it is a well-written book, clearly and coherently organized, providing interested readers with a consistent and thorough point of view.

According to Plater's controlling thesis, Pynchon's imaginative world is defined and bounded by the metaphor of entropy. With reference to Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, this view is consistently argued, so that both language and the self are closed systems. Having read this far into Plater's "Preliminaries," the reader would suppose (correctly) that Plater's view of Pynchon's world is pretty grim. Many readers of Pynchon surely have been dismayed by this opening gambit, for reflection upon the characters of Dennis Flange ("enslaved" by metaphor) and Callisto (who was "aware of the dangers of the reductive fallacy," but who nevertheless "found in entropy . . . an adequate metaphor") tells us that entropy is not a boundary of Pynchon's fiction but an active idea within it. Plater's entire book is subject to this early Wittgensteinian reflex to align the boundaries of meaning intended by Pynchon's writing with the metaphors within the writing.

Despite Plater's dependence upon Wittgenstein, his initial focus upon the language of Pynchon's fiction is promising: "If Pynchon's fictional world is a closed system, then it must be subject to entropy; and yet fiction is nothing more than language" (GP, 10). This statement leads us to expect a discussion of events in the fiction as the result of the decay of language, but no such tack is pursued. This is but one example of the ways in which his early pages suggest a subtlety of understanding which Plater felt compelled to omit in order to retain his grip on Pynchon's complexity.
As Töloşyan has written, the best chapter in this book is "Baedeker Land." Plater unravels Pynchon's metaphor of the "tour" as a description of the deterioration of experience in the twentieth century; in addition he shows how tourism finds its reincarnation in the quests and films of Pynchon's next two books. This is a line of analysis with a logical relation to the thesis of the previous chapter (both world and fiction are closed systems), for the tour--like language--is also a closed system which follows a guide to "landscape" rather than explores the "land." This is an extension of the proposition in his first chapter (and an example of the book's masterful consistency): "The identity of V. . . . is a model of the world as it is seen rather than as it exists" (GP, 21).

In that proposition, Plater inclines toward an extreme view which collapses representations of reality (in Pynchon's writing) and reality. In "Baedeker Land" this is made explicit: "In Pynchon's hands . . . this power of Baedeker stands as a symbol of man's knowledge of the world, a world known only by its representation" (GP, 66). This view allies Plater with those for whom the world is "ultimately inaccessible" (Mendelson, P, 8), and leads him to assume untenable positions. Oedipa's quest, he argues, only replaces her Kinneret Baedeker with a tourism of the mind (GP, 87). Her "initial perception of her existence in an isolated system is not finally altered by her tour" (GP, 82). But this view lingers in the same equivocation trapping Oedipa, for the isolation outside she experiences at the novel's end is a far "cry" from her isolation inside at its beginning. Despite the persistent ambiguity surrounding the reality and meaning of Tristero, this Tristero has enabled Oedipa's communion with the world of waste Kinneret had hidden.

A similar tendency to push his views to their extreme statement mars David Cowart's otherwise useful and scholarly Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion. Cowart's book is an analysis of Pynchon's allusions to painting, film, music and literature, and is not about the "art" of allusion. This book is judicious in its scope and brings to Pynchon's writing detailed research and interpretation. The Art of Allusion is
compelling reading because we are persuaded by Cowart's learning and the insights his learning permits. Cowart's book shows that Pynchon's work rewards close reading and contains enough coherence and artistry to deserve such scholarship.

Cowart's interpretation of V.'s third chapter, "She Hangs on the Western Wall," is convincing precisely because of his detailed understanding of Pynchon's allusions to Venus. His commentary is not a mere unpacking of references, but often leads to conclusions about entire sections of Pynchon's writing and their place in the larger scheme of the novel. For example, his analysis here reveals Chapter 3 to be a record of Victoria Wren's further incorporation of "V-ness": "the birth of V-ness is conceived as a travesty of Botticelli's Birth of Venus" (AA, 19); and he thus shows how an attention to allusion uncovers some of the integumental logic determining V.'s composition. (Another striking example of such insight is Michael Seidel's interpretation of Slothrop's debasement at the Casino Hermann Goering: "Slothrop descendent is Slothrop regressive, a naked ape in regal robes. He plunges into the midst of a croquet game, a satiric hero, in effect, having interrupted a novel of manners. And there he stands: disturbed at love, displaced, naked under a royal toga, the king-beast Kong of the epigraph to this section of the book" (P, 202).

As in his chapter on painting, Cowart's discussion of film is thorough and illuminating. What is less compelling is a tendency--reminiscent of Plater--to use his information to generate broad statements Pynchon's fiction doesn't support. For example, Cowart asserts "Pynchon uses film as a critique of life, insisting that the one is not more or less real than the other" (AA, 32), which echoes Plater's cryptic comment, "film demonstrates, in a way that everyone recognizes, that life and illusion are both a matter of form" (GP, 124)--a comment which seems at odds with Plater's later remark, "reality necessarily involves illusion because it has no form of its own" (GP, 132). Cowart's and Plater's extreme views are possibly the result of Pynchon's thoroughness in demonstrating (in his fiction) the power of film to infiltrate the world in which film is shown, so that,
as in dreams, what is mere image or idea may become incarnate. Correcting for the distortions of Gravity's Rainbow (as Mendelson suggests), this is simply to say that reality can be and is "made." Fiction may serve as the motive or pre-text or blueprint of what comes to occupy space, time, and power (as has the rocket). But nowhere in Pynchon's writing do I see the reverse implication, that reality is illusion. On the contrary, reality "accumulates" and grows like Pren- tice's Giant Adenoid (taking the shape of our "very worst, se-cret fears?").

Cowart's chapter on musical allusions contains one of the best analyses of "Under the Rose" I have read. His knowledge of Manon Lescaut--its music and musical history--is impressive, as is his use of that knowledge to clarify this short story and its relations to Chapter 3 of V... But again Cowart's discussion is held together by an unconvincing thesis: "Music, in these books, seems always to hint at the extra dimensions of experience that one misses because of the narrow range of frequencies--physical or spiritual--to which one is attuned" (AA, 81). Enforcing this pattern leads Cowart to read the electronic music of the Scope Bar as a prelude to Oedipa's enlightenment, rather than as cultural satire. Allusions to Stock- hausen do presage her blossoming insight, but not in the salutary and unproblematic way that Cowart sug- gests. That is, the music alluded to is not always endorsed merely because it enlarges our imaginations; nor does it always do so. The musical allusions of "Entropy," for example, pursue an entropic progression from chorded music to music without chords to music entirely imagined; this is a musical variation on the subject of entropy, not the theme of "expanded per- ceptual horizons" (AA, 85).

None of this should gainsay the abundance of par- ticular and specific information provided by The Art of Allusion. Readers will be delighted with the additional biographical facts Cowart has culled from correspondence with former teachers and friends. Moreover, the style of this book is lucid and often entertaining, as in the description of Oedipa's mind as "the ganglion of Tristero's apparently endless reticulation" (AA, 23).
On the other hand, I cannot agree with Cowart's generous review of Douglas Fowler's A Reader's Guide to Gravity's Rainbow. The book does not compare at all favorably with Stuart Gilbert's guide to Ulysses, and largely for reasons that inhere in Pynchon's novel. Gravity's Rainbow resists the concept of a "guide." Gilbert had Joyce's assistance; moreover, Ulysses permits and invites guiding. Of course, there are ways in which readers may be instructed in their reading of Gravity's Rainbow. All the criticism reviewed here (and more) will serve as a collective guide. But a guide ought at least to begin by telling us of those areas which have been mapped, rather than merely adding to speculation. Watching Fowler divide Gravity's Rainbow into a battle between "our world of logic and rationality and the five senses and a nightmare world that has begun to penetrate it and threaten it" (RG, 10) takes one back to the naive beginnings of readers' responses. Moreover, Fowler appears to contradict himself, for a few pages later the word "rational" is now attributed to the Other Kingdom, though this kingdom no longer seems to be part of the "magical" world intruding upon ours, but includes, one gathers, parts of our world: "the Christian North, 'death's region,' the land of technology, repression, rationalized destruction" (RG, 19).

This apparent confusion is rendered inexcusable by the lofty tone Fowler has adopted. Writing of Pynchon's use of Herero, he says "one can more or less accept that vocabulary as more or less correct" (RG, 116). This is not a guide which inspires confidence, and given the repeated demonstration of his faulty, uncertain and partial knowledge, Fowler's cavalier tone is difficult to accept. Cowart pays attention to Fowler's efforts to describe Pynchon as a gothic writer, but those efforts proceed without definition or argument (compare the competence of Mendelson's "encyclopedic narrative," Smith and Tööölyan's "jeremiad," and Seidel's "satire"), and skim along on mere opinion: "It seems to me that it is as gothic sensationalists that both Eliot and Pynchon should be read"(RG, 32); "For whatever it's worth I think I sense this sort of impulse in Pynchon" (RG, 41-42). Fowler's annotations are uneven, often no more than glib admissions of ignorance. Further, as any reader who has accumulated such information
knows, annotations by themselves do very little to reduce perplexity. A list of them cannot be called a guide.

By any measure, Pynchon criticism is in its early stages. Several of the books reviewed here have appeared within a two-year period, so that their authors could not benefit from one another, as will other critics in the future. Despite its inconsistencies and simplifications, Pynchon criticism provides readers of Pynchon with much reliable information. Moreover, it must be acknowledged that this essay has dealt primarily with that criticism which has found its way into book form; there is a great deal of commentary I have not addressed. Each issue of Pynchon Notes informs us of a growing bibliography. Also, I have been at pains to underline a recurring neglect, and so have no doubt neglected much that is valuable. By insisting upon greater attention to the literary properties of Pynchon's writing, I am not urging more "hermetic self-referentiality" (Mendelson, p. 15), for Pynchon's writing implicates its readers and turns them toward the world. How it does this, the literary art which gives the fiction life, point and relevant complexity, is an aspect of Pynchon's writing that deserves further scholarship.

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Notes

1 Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1980), 3. Subsequent references to this text will be enclosed in parentheses (AA).

2 Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon, ed. George Levine and David Leverenz (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), 119. Hereafter referred to within my text as MP.


Mendelson's discussion of "encyclopedic narrative" and its implications is furthered in his introduction to his edition of Pynchon essays.


One (Christian) example of meta-existence that comes to mind is "Heaven."

I have drawn this list from V. L. Parrington's third volume of Main Currents in American Thought (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1930), 323-27.

Pacific Coast Philology, 12 (1977), 50-55.

The Cornell Writer, 6, No. 2 (1959), 14-32.


De-faced America: The Great Gatsby and The Crying of Lot 49

Charles Baxter

In recent history, the acceleration of radical change has been so great that it has become ever harder to create intelligible links between oneself and the past. Extremely rapid change implies a series of breaks in historical sequence; episodes of contemporary life seem anomalous, lacking a past against which to measure them, and every event seems a crisis. The victim (or perpetrator) of such radical change can try to wipe out the past and to deny it, in which case the repressed elements torture themselves into potential neurosis. Alternatively, one can analyze the past, searching for key elements with which to explain change, in which case prolonged retrospection invades and shapes—according to the patterns of the past—the "new" present that had been so fervently craved.

Whatever form the sudden shifts of contemporary history take, they throw a tremendous burden on the individual's ability to "read" his own past; in addition, they virtually force him either to explain it or to wipe it out. In the latter case, a potentially meaningful set is turned into informational static: "My past means nothing." But if the past means nothing, by what means does the observer "read" the present? To what do all the signs seem to refer?

When radical changes of this type begin to occur at the level of an entire culture, an additional problem arises, simply because it is more difficult for society as a whole to profess amnesia. Police states have had notorious lapses in memory, but in a free society the past is not always buried so easily. What is more likely to happen, as F. Scott Fitzgerald recognized in The Great Gatsby, is that a culture's inherited ideals, and its actual values and methods, can co-exist even when the two are contradictory, just so long as no one attempts to integrate them, or to resolve their contradictions. When, however, some attempt is made to resolve the problem because the contradictions constantly tease the mind into the effort of reconciliation—despite the fact that these same contradictions also make true resolution impossible—then the disparity
between past ideals and present actuality can lead to something approaching schizophrenia, or to a situation in which an unreadable message or system of meanings defies every effort to de-code it. This is exactly the case in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, where history has literally become unreadable; furthermore, since many of the images in Pynchon's novel are borrowed wholesale from *Gatsby*, the entire question of integration is complicated by both literary and cultural history. In both these novels, certain themes and preoccupations having to do with history, culture, and "reading" coincide, and they do so around a central image: the face.

In fiction generally, the face serves as an index to character; it is the window to the soul, and so on. These assumptions depend on the reader's, or a character's, ability to "read" the faces presented to him; if the face is not a text, it is at least a series of signs that indicate a set of meanings, even when a character is being duplicitous and is holding up a phony mask for the world to read. Only an innocent or a fool shows the world, via his face, what he thinks and feels all the time. But when a character or a culture goes through a radical change, and still professes to believe the earlier discarded ideal, something beyond acting, or hypocrisy, occurs. The contradictions begin to cancel themselves out, and the face becomes a blank, or it may do its best to mirror the other. The face becomes unreadable, or vacant. Its emptiness reflects a self perceived as an absence. The experience of the face-as-absence (and it can be perceived by either characters in fiction, or by the reader of fiction) tends to point to a larger problem of reading signs in general whenever the world is turned into a text; at this point, the fictional character, or the reader, is forced to examine faces or texts in which most of the signs and meanings either cancel one another out, or cannot be de-coded. Since the disappearing face implies an obliterated history and a crime buried within it, it suggests the ascendancy of doubt and guilt together, a sense that all is not well historically: what wants to be said or expressed cannot find its form, and so obliterates the forms that do exist.
In a culture popularly without self-doubts about its ethos (America from 1865 to 1900), the individual achieves his success through widely-sanctioned means. He is told that wealth is earned through hard work; he works hard and gets what he wants. Opportunities, it is thought, abound. Once success is achieved, the self-made man tells others what he has been told, since the message has, he believes, reflected what the case is. Both his words and his face are "sincere"—they are presumably what they mean; Horatio Alger's novels overflow with sincerity of this type. Doubts in Alger are sublimated into the freak shows and "curiosities" in almost every novel; doubts in others at this period and before (Thoreau, Henry Adams) are expressed by actual, physical withdrawal or by a style that withdraws from what it examines (Adams's irony). These withdrawals assume that the social world can be escaped, or at least evaded. Faces at this period either show what is felt, or they lie; they do not disappear, with one prophetic exception—Stephen Crane's "The Monster."

But when opportunities slip, and the individual still wants the success he has been promised, an unstated shift must take place. He must repeat what he has been told the case is, but he must act in a wholly contradictory way, which is to say that he will go outside society's bounds and commit crimes to gain what he wants. But since he still supposes that the ethos of opportunity holds, he begins to be (though not to say) a self-contradiction. He wants, as Stephen Crane says, to "efface" himself. He cannot be read as a hypocrite, because he believes at some level what he says. For example, "I believe in America" is the first line of the film of The Godfather. (The gangster is "a man of respect." ) Truth, then, does not for such a person emerge from a good opinion of the self, because one's opinion of the self reeks of contradiction and chaos; the truth of character must come from others, be donated by others and repeatedly asserted in defiance of palpable actions; the name for this sort of good opinion is "respectability." It is the classic form of existentialist bad faith.

When Gatsby is published in 1925, the norm of respectability has already started to slip toward the curious: the freak show is invited into the Gatsby
mansion, where it entertains others by entertaining itself. But the narrator, who comes virtually out of nowhere, is no freak; he is "one of the few honest people" he has ever known, and it is his duty, almost his calling, to understand Gatsby and Gatsby's legacy, and to be able to see the contradictions within it without being sucked up into them. He is honest and sincere, he thinks. Both attracted and repelled by Gatsby's world, he tries to reserve judgment, being "within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled," in a critical nowhere that permits irony but not commitment.

Nick Carraway's efforts to understand Gatsby's personal and financial fortunes lead him away from character analysis into what amounts to a piece of detective work. As in most detective fiction, a crime has been perpetrated and the criminal is putting on an act. Furthermore, Gatsby has arranged the tableaux in which he appears, so that no one will see the split between the private and public selves, the one that smiles and the one that "makes deals." It is important in this connection to remember that Gatsby is a self-obliterated man. As a youth, James Gatz's heart is in a "constant, turbulent riot"—a mess of desires—and in order to realize his dreams he kills off his old self, "at the specific moment that witnessed the beginning of his career—when he saw Dan Cody's yacht drop anchor over the most insidious flat on Lake Superior." Thinking that history and selfhood can be renounced, he invents Jay Gatsby, a conception of selfhood meant to reach the "meretricious beauty" represented by Cody's yacht. Gatsby does not achieve respectability; he invents it, as he invents his new self. He discards his old name, identity, and parents—"his imagination had never accepted them as his parents at all." He becomes a fiction. The self-made man starts as a void, or so he thinks.

His mistake, as Nick Carraway discovers, is to believe his own fictions and to forget the crimes that finance them. Gatsby's face is his most extraordinary creation. The private face and self bankroll the public ones, but if respectability shines forth in the public image, "turbulent riot" leers out from underneath and seems to be expressed by Gatsby's party guests. Gatsby's particular innocence is that he cannot see or recognize the riot. Speaking of Meyer
Wolfsheim's fix of the 1919 World Series, Gatsby says, "He just saw the opportunity," an Alger-ish remark that translates crime into romantic possibility. Nick may be horrified that Wolfsheim has tampered with the "faith of fifty million people," but the faith of fifty million people is exactly what Gatsby left behind when he changed his name and wiped out his past. Gatsby's self-faith makes other crimes seem irrelevant as well: he has been mixed up in bootlegging and stock-market fraud, though to what degree is unclear. Fitzgerald leaves the underground business ventures more-or-less underground; it is not the burden of Nick's investigation to discover how far into the culture Gatsby's influence has permeated, or how far his deceit has been systematized. That kind of quest belongs to Oedipa Maas in The Crying of Lot 49.

What Nick does see is the enormous discrepancy between public and private worlds, what is on stage and what is behind the scenes. Gatsby's estate is like a Hollywood set. The theater of appearance, of fiction, appears on weekends, and "takes the sun on the hot sand of his beach." Extravagance (public) is processed into waste (private) that must be cleaned up and disposed.

On week-ends his Rolls-Royce became an omnibus, bearing parties to and from the city between nine in the morning and long past midnight, while his station wagon scampered like a brisk yellow bug to meet all trains. And on Mondays eight servants, including an extra gardener, toiled all day with mops and scrubbing-brushes and hammers and garden-shears, repairing the ravages of the night before.

Every Friday five crates of oranges and lemons arrived from a fruiterer in New York--every Monday these same oranges and lemons left his back door in a pyramid of pulpless halves. (39)

Behind the mansions and their lawns is the familiar urban dump, rural America's hideous double, "where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens."

In such a landscape, where quotation marks suddenly sprout around words like "success," faces grow confused,
their expressions clogged. Informational noise overrides true information. Myrtle Wilson's sister Catherine has

a complexion powdered milky white. Her eye-brows had been plucked and then drawn on again at a more rakish angle but the efforts of nature toward the restoration of the old alignment gave a blurred air to her face. (30)

Jordan Baker's face looks like a balancing act (9), and Daisy's presentation of self seems to Nick to be "a trick of some sort to exact a contributary emotion" (18). At the center of attention is Gatsby's face, with its two outstanding qualities: the way it can mirror hope, and its ability to disappear.

It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced—or seemed to face—the whole external world for an instant, and then concentrated on you with an irresistible prejudice in your favor. It understood you just as far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself. . . . Precisely at that point it vanished. . . . (48)

Behind this disappearing face is the Art Deco corruption and waste that the smile hides, an emotional clutter like the messes Tom and Daisy Buchanan leave in their wake, a mess that must be cleaned if "faith" is to survive. Nick confronts two systems of communication, two interlocking mythologies here: one built upon conscious, Alger-esque, smiling, positivistic principles; the other upon unconscious, Hobbesian, libido-soaked impulses. Both systems can explain certain phenomena, but neither system can explain how the other system came into existence, or how it operates. The smiling face cannot explain the corruption, because that is not part of its system. Each gives contradictory explanations for the same phenomena, but the contradictions exist in a suspended state for any individual who can, like Nick, reserve judgment. What these myths cannot do is form a synthesis; what lies between them is an ideological no-man's land ruled (or at least gazed over) by the most famous billboard in American literature, the vacant face of Dr. Eckleburg.
Between these two mythologies, then, there is no compromise. Nick cannot reconcile the obscene word scrawled on "that huge incoherent failure of a house" with the house itself, at the end of the novel. The house and the obscenity constitute an insupportable contradiction, even granting Nick's capacity for "reserving judgment." He rubs out the word. But erasing the word cannot redeem the house. Like the fake mansions de Tocqueville sees upon arriving in America, with whitewashed brick meant to look like marble, the obscenity stands for a larger system that cannot be so easily obliterated; it is to the house what Gatsby's swindles are to the smile. It is like a plate of hors d'oeuvres intermixed with garbage. Nick's good fortune is to have seen both systems, and not to have been sucked up into either one. In Gatsby some kind of detachment seems to triumph for the moment; Nick frees himself from the tar-baby, but Gatsby's legacy is nonetheless a deeply disturbed and embryonically schizoid vision of America. The Eckleburg face moves off the billboard and into the streets.

Forty-one years later, in The Crying of Lot 49, the legacy has been so hopelessly tangled that to sort it out—"sorting" is one of the book's primary metaphors—seems a virtually obsolescent activity. "Sorting" implies clear categories, and categories suggest some kind of sure epistemological methodology; but there is no such certainty here, not even the suggestion of one. Nick Carraway has turned into Oedipa Maas, puzzle solver, and Gatsby has turned into Pierce Inverarity, a "California real estate mogul" and Oedipa's ex-lover, who as the novel opens has died, leaving Oedipa as executor. His assets, Pynchon remarks cryptically, are "numerous and tangled." Thus begins Oedipa's investigation into Pierce's "will," an investigation that, unlike Nick's, leads not to shocking epiphanies and revelations, but to increasing confusion and despair. In this novel it is no longer possible to tell the mansion and the legacy from the waste surrounding it (here systematized, employing a mode of communication called W.A.S.T.E.). Possessor and the thing possessed are now confused, fused to a point where they dissolve one another.

The first signals in Lot 49 that echo Gatsby and its preoccupations appear on the first page. Gatsby,
it may be remembered, has a portrait of his idol and surrogate father, Dan Cody, hanging in his bedroom, a curious place for this picture of a man "with a hard, empty face." As he begins Lot 49, the reader is told that Pierce Inverarity's idol, Jay Gould, is represented in the Inverarity bedroom by a "whitewashed bust . . . the only ikon in the house"—that stands on a narrow shelf above the bed. Oedipa has worried that some day this hard face will teeter and fall on herself and Pierce, and she wonders whether this image from the past may have accidentally fallen and killed Inverarity in his sleep, "among dreams." While both Gatsby and Inverarity inherit hard faces and dreams from the past, what they pass on cannot be so well-defined. If Gatsby's face and smile are ambiguous, Inverarity's is virtually invisible. The reader is introduced to him as he speaks to Oedipa on the phone, his voice modulating from role to role, in a constant evasion of self-hood.

. . . . there had come this long-distance call . . . by a voice beginning in heavy Slavic tones as second secretary at the Transylvanian Consulate, looking for an escaped bat; modulated to comic-Negro, then on into hostile Pachuco dialect, full of chingas and maricones; then a Gestapo officer asking her in shrieks did she have relatives in Germany and finally his Lamont Cranston voice, the one he'd talked in all the way down to Mazatlán.4

And as Lamont Cranston, the Shadow, he follows her all through the novel, in both his will and its mirror, the Tristero.

Also in the first chapter is a man who calls Oedipa on the phone and whose voice "sounded like Pierce doing a Gestapo officer." This voice belongs to Oedipa's psychotherapist, Dr. Hilarius, an ex-Nazi whose specialty is "faces." Hilarius apparently has the ability to make faces that either cure or drive men mad. Now, as a good ex-Nazi, he is out to cure.

His theory being that a face is symmetrical like a Rorschach blot, tells a story like a TAT picture, excites a response like a suggested word, so why not. He claimed to have once cured a case of hysterical blindness with his number
It is Pierce's face, or rather the absence of it, that will drive Oedipa out of the norm (though not into the arms of Hilarious, who will be mad himself, his guilty past having come back to seize him after his attempts to obliterate it).

Oedipa also asks Ralph Driblette, the director of The Courier's Tragedy, a question about faces: whether the ominous and dreamlike "knowing looks" his actors give one another are accidental or directed. Directed, Driblette tells her from the shower, and when Oedipa asks him about "this Trystero," Ralph Driblette's face "abruptly vanished back into the steam." It is like asking Gatsby about the sources of his cash.

In her quest, Oedipa recapitulates Nick Carraway's feelings of being both within and without, except that being "within" now means being a prisoner, like a maiden in a tower. Unfortunately "the tower is everywhere and the knight of deliverance no proof against its magic." An ironic reserve is difficult; actual withdrawal from the social world is impossible. The concepts of "in" and "out" are gone, or are part of each other. As Oedipa is imprisoned in the spreading boundary, amorphous and web-like, of Inverarity's "estate," she first believes the estate to be simple: his headquarters (a "grouping of concepts" called San Narciso) and a stamp collection. But looking at this town/concept of San Narciso, Oedipa has one of her first unpleasant shocks: San Narciso looks like a printed radio circuit, a hieroglyph of "concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate." As she gazes at objects-as-information, it may occur to her that she may be a piece of information, too. The meaning of San Narciso hangs above her.

There'd seemed no limit to what the printed circuit could have told her (if she had tried to find out); so in her first minute of San Narciso, a revelation also trembled just past the threshold of her understanding. . . . As if, on some other frequency, or out of the eye of some whirlwind rotating too slow for her heated skin even to feel the centrifugal coolness of, words were being spoken. (24-25)

Confronted with the first evidence of the "estate,"
Oedipa approaches the point of meaning but never reaches it. Compare this "odd, religious instant" (Pynchon's phrase) with the end of Chapter Six of Gatsby, after Nick has heard the story of Gatsby's romance with Daisy.

Through all he said, even through his appalling sentimentality, I was reminded of something--an elusive rhythm, a fragment of lost words, that I had heard somewhere a long time ago. For a moment a phrase tried to take shape in my mouth and my lips parted like a dumb man's, as though there was more struggling upon them than a wisp of startled air. But they made no sound, and what I had almost remembered was uncommunicable forever. (112)

Both Nick and Oedipa approach meaning--the key to the tower--but for both it is elusive. Later that evening she watches television, and the faces on the screen evoke the unnameable "immediacy" again. It is as though the entire culture she lives in has undergone a radical change, re-named itself and disguised itself, and turned an Eckleburgish face to the world.

The Tristero is in part a vast expansion of the outcasts of Gatsby, who live in the ash-heaps behind the mansion. Its members communicate by means of Significant Looks and other private forms of discourse: graffiti and the W.A.S.T.E. operation. The graffiti, like the obscenity that appears on Gatsby's mansion, gives expression to the outsider's version of things. On a latrine wall, Oedipa finds invitations to "sophisticated fun," responses to which must come by W.A.S.T.E. Underneath is another hieroglyphic, a muted horn. As writing or as a system, however, the signification here is garbled. Just as Gatsby's personality can be represented through an image of contradictions (an empty face, a beautiful mansion with FUCK scrawled on it), the Tristero and W.A.S.T.E. systems can be read in two ways, by those within and those without. Those outside see W.A.S.T.E. boxes as trash containers, those within as mailboxes. In this schizoid landscape, meaning explodes out of the forms that initially gave rise to it. Like Inverarity's holdings, signification spreads relentlessly, filling in gaps where it seems to be absent. There is a clutter, a junkyard of meaning in the book.
There was an intermission. . . . Oedipa headed for the ladies' room. She looked idly around for the symbol she'd seen the other night in The Scope, but all the walls, surprisingly, were blank. She could not say why, exactly, but felt threatened by this absence of even the marginal try at communication latrines are known for. (69-70)

In a late chapter of the novel, Oedipa wanders around the Bay Area at night, as Nick Carraway wanders around Long Island and Manhattan, observing the "curiosities" who have lost the Alger-esque American dream, but who seem to have inherited a counter-community, the Tristero wasteland whose emblem is a sign of silence, a muted post horn.

Among her other encounters were a facially-deformed welder, who cherished his ugliness; a child roaming the night who missed the death before birth as certain outcasts do the dear lulling blankness of the community . . . Deco-
rating each alienation, each species of withdrawal, as cufflink, decal, aimless doodling, there was somehow always the post horn. (123)

But what has Inverarity to do with this collection of people and signs? The Tristero system would seem to be antithetical to everything Inverarity stands for. But as it turns out, he has rights to most of the cruci-

placess where the code surfaces, or, as Pynchon says, "Every access route to the Tristero could be traced also back to the Inverarity estate." The haves cannot be sorted out from the have-nots; the "establishment" may be in league with the resistance. It is impossible to read the situation properly. Whate-

ver face Inverarity seems to hold up is contradicted by one that may or may not be an expression of his "will"—and the whole operation may be part of an enormous joke whose intentions are so byzantine that Oedipa cannot pursue them and stay sane. Alger-esque faith, reduced in Gatsby to skepticism, has been fur-

ther reduced here to paranoid doubt and fear. The legacy knows no bounds and cannot be classified.

Pynchon tells us that what Oedipa had not guessed to begin with was "that the legacy was America," in all its unnameability. One may reach, make a gesture,
toward the unnameable thing, as Gatsby does as he rides on the train away from Louisville, Daisy's hometown.

The track curved and now it was going away from the sun, which, as it sank lower, seemed to spread itself in benediction over the vanishing city where she had drawn her breath. He stretched out his hand desperately as if to snatch only a wisp of air. . . . But it was all going by too fast now for his blurred eyes and he knew that he had lost that part of it, the freshest and the best, forever. (153)

Or as Oedipa does as she walks along another set of tracks, realizing that dreams and language are intertwined, and that when dreams expand they become less accessible to any kind of discourse, finally dropping into the realm of silence.

She walked down a stretch of railroad track next to the highway. Spurs ran off here and there into factory property. Pierce may have owned these factories too. But did it matter now if he'd owned all of San Narciso? San Narciso was a name; an incident among our climatic records of dreams and what dreams became among our accumulated daylight, a moment's squall-line or tornado's touchdown among the higher, more continental solemnities--storm-systems of group suffering and need, prevailing winds of affluence. There was the true continuity; San Narciso had no boundaries. (177-78)

In the great meditations that end these two novels, the similarities between them are made even more clear. As Oedipa thinks about Inverarity in her walk along the tracks, she remembers a statement he once made to her, a summation of his philosophy of pointless energy. "'Keep it bouncing,' he'd told her once, 'that's all the secret, keep it bouncing.'" This piece of advice, which amounts to Inverarity's epitaph, is remarkably similar to the rhymed quatrain on Gatsby's title-page, by "Thomas Parke D'Invilliers":

Then wear the gold hat, if that will move her;
If you can bounce high, bounce for her too,
Till she cry "Lover, gold-hatted, high-bouncing lover,
I must have you!"

The non-existent poet who starts off *Gatsby* by advising the reader to "bounce" in order to please "her," and make her cry out for possession, believes in the same dynamic principles that brought the nearly-mythic Pierce to his fortune. In both cases the American idea of energy-at-all-costs is the only means to quell or to satisfy the equally American hunger for possession. Both Fitzgerald and Pynchon have made their tycoons into lovers who must possess—infuse themselves (confuse themselves) into what they own. Though Inverarity is rather more successful, they both leave a mess of relics behind. Inverarity is unsatisfied with just Oedipa; he must have more:

Though he had never talked business with her, she had known it to be a fraction of him that couldn't come out even, would carry forever beyond any decimal place she might name; her love, such as it had been, remaining incommensurate with his need to possess. . . . (178)

The wording of this passage and its tone may remind the reader of a bit of history with which *Gatsby* ends:

. . . for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder. (182)

"Something commensurate to his capacity for wonder" has given way to an inadequate love, "incommensurate with his need to possess." Wonder has been eroticized, or, rather, it has been marketed into desire and then into possession. The progression moves through space: the Dutch sailors see the continent at a distance and are possessed, themselves, by wonder; Gatsby reaches out to the object of his love, but it and she draw back before he can touch them; closer still, Inverarity grabs what he desires and, in effect, becomes indistinguishable from his possessions, melting into them. As this progression continues, the face of the possessor (and the possession) is harder and harder to
make out. At last the face is so de-faced that analytical effort is just wasted. "Inner" and "outer" boundaries are lost: what Oedipa thinks is also what she hallucinates.

A man looking at the world in the twentieth century runs a risk, as Heisenberg and others have warned, of finding only himself. Nature is covered or obliterated by the artifacts of man. Wonder gives way to desire and desire to exegesis. Perhaps, as both Fitzgerald and Pynchon suggest, an identity with the country has also meant a sense of separation, a feeling that unites the mid-westerners of the first part of this century with the drifters of the present time.

We drew in deep breaths of it as we walked back from dinner through the cold vestibules, unutterably aware of our identity with this country for one strange hour, before we melted indistinguishably into it again. (Gatsby, 177)

She remembered drifters she had listened to, Americans speaking their language carefully, scholarly, as if they were in exile from somewhere else invisible yet congruent with the cheered land she lived in; and walkers along the roads at night . . . too far from any town to have a real destination. (Lot 49, 180)

But Pynchon, predictably enough, goes further: his novel has no space in it uninvaded by man, and therefore no place where the exegetical capacity can rest (if one means to understand it on a cognitive level). For every object created by man is also a projection of sorts, by which both conscious and unconscious desires are manifested in space. To build a car is, depending on its design and horsepower, to say something about power, sexuality, and domination. Those who are able to "read" the mythology implicit in a fairly simple object like a car, for example, will find themselves bewildered by the multiplicity of mythologies bombarding them in an advanced technological state. The face that Fitzgerald's America presents is relatively simple, if somewhat schizoid, resting as it does on a sequence of dualisms, one-half of which are blessed with innocence (the "green breast of the new world"). Innocence does not require reading, because it is not a message. It just is.
The other half, the part that has been defaced or submerged, requires decoding. One looks at the world and instead of seeing trees, sees Dr. Eckleburg's empty face staring back. This look seems to imply judgment and projection, but since it is a blank, it can imply anything. Nick Carraway can "read" the situation in *Gatsby* and withdraw—presumably—from it, carrying the reader with him. By the time Pynchon writes, the suggestion is that the entire culture has been through a radical change of some sort, that there is some crime buried in its past, that Pierce Inverarity is a key to this crime, and that the blank look of Eckleburg is now... everywhere, on everybody's face. Processing this code for even "sensitized" people like Oedipa becomes impossible. She ends the novel by "settling back," waiting, almost wholly passive. In this, in her trouble with signals, she resembles the schizophrenic patient described in Gregory Bateson's "Epidemiology of a Schizophrenia."

At one end of the classification of those [*synadromata*], there will be more or less hebephrenic individuals for whom no message is of any particular type but who live in a sort of chronic shaggy-dog story. At the other end are those who try to over-identify, to make an overly rigid identification of what sort of message every message is. This will give a much more paranoid type of picture. Withdrawal is another possibility.  

After going through stages one and two, Oedipa ends the novel at Bateson's stage three. If she escapes the fate of Pynchon's subsequent hero, Tyrone Slothrop, who is transformed into energy itself and distributed through time and space, she nonetheless has found herself lost, in the realm of "excluded middles" and "bad shit." Nick Carraway escapes with his integrity intact and his true inheritance of wisdom, back to the midwest (or at least out of the poisonous East), but the only place Oedipa can escape to is the privacy of her own interior, in psychic withdrawal—depression. She cannot physically or rhetorically escape from the legacy—the "estate"—of wrecked and merged identities.

Wayne State University
Notes

1 For example, see Roland Barthes's essay on Garbo's face in *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 56-57. Garbo's face, says Barthes, is an idea; Audrey Hepburn's, by contrast, is a series of "morphological functions."


5 This, incidentally, is very similar to the central plot device in Roman Polanski's and Robert Towne's film "about" California, *Chinatown*. The parallels are numerous, and require a separate essay.

Thomas Pynchon
and the Science Fiction Controversy

Mark Siegel

Since the publication of Gravity's Rainbow in 1973, Pynchon's "place" in American literature has been a matter of sweaty debate. He has been labeled an encyclopedist, an expressionist, a satirist, and a fabulist. Of course, the contemporary writer crosses currents in the literary mainstream like an undisciplined trout, and the critics, fastidious pigeon-holers that we may be, are bound and determined to find the one deep well that can rightly be called his home, the better to seize him there. So far, the results with Pynchon are more mixed than this metaphor.

One lure frequently cast in Pynchon's supposed direction is the label SCIENCE FICTION WRITER. This may come as a shock or an insult to mainstreamers who don't read SF or SF criticism, or may, to the same people who see that current in literature as shallow and unproductive, seem unimportant. However, SF criticism is no longer in its infancy, and has, in fact, engendered a fairly sophisticated debate on genre poetics. (Robert Scholes's Structural Fabulation is one such work, and Darko Suvin's Metamorphoses of Science Fiction is a more complex and detailed analysis of the qualities of SF.) When important mainstream critics like Scholes begin to make claims that SF writer Ursula LeGuin may be America's greatest contemporary author, it is time for literary purists to cast off their snobbery and take a good look in the direction of this dark bank.

Some SF writers have counted Pynchon among their number for some time, and have even castigated him for his failure to live up to the full potential of the genre. While Geoffrey Cocks has called Gravity's Rainbow "a science-fiction masterpiece on the order of Paradise Lost,"¹ noted SF writer John Brunner has assessed both the strong points of the novel and its failure to clearly state its message for the future.² Both of the major scholarly journals in the SF field, Extrapolation³ and Science-Fiction Studies⁴ have published articles on Pynchon, attempting to evaluate his achievements in light of the genre's concerns and aesthetics.
On the other hand, some SF critics and a great many SF readers probably would deny that there is much to say about Pynchon as an SF writer. What is and is not SF is a matter of the definitional debate that will probably always rage among the genre's scholars. What is surprising is the absence of consideration of this primary matter of definition in most of the published discussions about Pynchon as an SF writer.

Definitions of science fiction abound, but tend to be divisible into two major categories: (1) SF involves the extrapolation from our current knowledge about the cosmos to suggest possible implications for the past or future; or (2) SF is primarily the metaphorical treatment of contemporary concerns. A further distinction is often drawn between science fiction and fantasy, according to which SF attempts to maintain some relation of verisimilitude to the known laws of physical reality, whereas fantasy violates these same laws not just unabashedly but intentionally. It is not obvious, however, that Pynchon fits any of these categorical definitions.

From the 1920s, when SF began to be defined as a literary genre, until about 1970, extrapolative definitions of SF predominated—in fact, were almost unchallenged. The most famous was SF editor John W. Campbell's definition: "To be science fiction, ... an honest effort at prophetic extrapolation of the known must be made." This definition has evolved somewhat in its application to the works Campbell actually published by writers like Isaac Asimov. L. David Allen recreates a modern version of this definition: "science fiction is a literary subgenre which postulates a change (for human beings) from conditions as we know them and follows the implications of these changes to a conclusion." James Gunn offers a further sophistication: "Science fiction is the branch of literature that deals with the effects of change on people in the real world as it can be projected into the past, the future, or to distant places. It often concerns itself with scientific or technological change, and it usually involves matters whose importance is greater than the individual or the community; often civilization or the race itself is in danger." 

None of Pynchon's works fits these definitions very well because the main focus of his concern is our con-
temporary reality, not the future and not distant worlds. Certainly Pynchon is interested in the "effects of change on people in the real world as it can be projected into the past;" certainly he concerns himself with scientific and technological change; and certainly his works may be seen to concern the fate of "civilization or the race itself." But Pynchon's historical concerns are always aimed at penetrating the confusion of the present, and he almost never envisions the future except by implication. To interpret Gunn's definition in a sense extreme enough to encompass *V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, or *Gravity's Rainbow* is to open the definition as well to any serious historical novel, thus demolishing the entire concept of genre. While political or historical reconstruction may be found in SF, it is also found in the works of Shakespeare and *The Report of the Warren Commission*.

In the 1970s, Suvin and Scholes attempted to redefine SF as "the literature of cognitive dissonance" or "cognitive estrangement"—that is, as a literature that, by imaginatively making the ordinary appear extraordinary, restores a freshness of vision to the jaded observer of contemporary events and suggests new perspectives on our reality. This redefinition of the genre paralleled a radical shift in its development during the previous decade in the hands of SF writers who came to be called "the New Wave." It was lent further credibility by the critical commentary of the writer many scholars consider to be the best in the genre, Ursula LeGuin: "Science fiction is not predictive; it is descriptive... All fiction is metaphor. Science fiction is metaphor. What sets it apart from older forms of fiction seems to be its use of new metaphors, drawn from certain great dominants of our contemporary life—science, all the sciences, and technology, and the relativistic and historical outlook, among them." These definitions of SF, at least superficially, come closer to describing Pynchon's fiction in a useful way. Pynchon's work clearly is described by LeGuin's definition. However, LeGuin does not bother to differentiate SF from much contemporary fiction, such as Mailer's *Of a Fire on the Moon*, or—since the definition does not require that any SF work be concerned with all these dominants—the fiction of
Beckett, Barth, Brautigan, Barthelme, the poetry of Wallace Stevens, or from the works of many others over the last several decades. When Scholes and Suvin do differentiate the genre, it is again in a way that would seem to exclude Pynchon. As Scholes says, "Fabulation is fiction that offers us a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the one we know, yet returns to confront that known world in some cognitive way." The worlds of Pynchon's fictions are not clearly discontinuous from the ones we know, but rather are most importantly continuations of these worlds, albeit from radical perspectives. Malta, New York City, and even war-torn Europe have more in common with Kansas than with Oz--these places are, as far as we can prove (and as far as fiction ever does prove anything) the known world.

Finally, Pynchon has been considered a fantasist by at least one critic,11 but here again definitions have been stretched far beyond their useful applicability. Fantasy literature, as it is differentiated from SF, is the fictional "realization of what never could have been, what cannot be, and what never will be within the social, cultural, and intellectual milieu of its creation."12 Pynchon's point is, at least some of the time, that his fantastical and paranoid flights might very well be accurate descriptions of our reality.

Isolated episodes in Gravity's Rainbow might be considered SF ("Heart-to-Heart, Man-to-Man") or fantasy ("The Story of Byron the Bulb), but these don't make the novel SF any more than Melville's employment of the cosmic newspaper at the beginning of Moby Dick makes that novel SF. Certainly Pynchon's concerns with the effects of scientific and technological advancement on human beings, with relativistic and historical outlooks, with the fate of the human species, and, perhaps stylistically, his emphatic concern with ideas rather than detailed characterization, parallel basic concerns of science fiction writers. However, there seems to be little justification for including his works on lists of science fiction. Perhaps the most reasonable assessment of Pynchon's position vis-a-vis science fiction is that of Richard Alan Schwartz, who concludes (for the wrong reasons) that Pynchon may prove to be a mediating figure in the current literary evolution that seems to
be reuniting SF and mainstream fiction. Because Pynchon incorporates elements included in all the definitions of SF and fantasy suggested above, while fulfilling none of them completely, it seems to me that Pynchon is at least an exemplary token of a reunification that is taking place.

University of Wyoming

Notes


3 Cocks, 368-77.


5 Quoted by Isaac Asimov, The History of Science Fiction from 1938 to the Present (Film), Univ. of Kansas, 1973.

6 L. David Allen, Science Fiction: An Introduction (Lincoln, NE: Cliff Notes, 1973), 121.


10 Scholes, 29.


13 Schwartz, 171.
Schaub's Pynchon

Edward Mendelson


Pynchon studies were born in 1963 with the first reviews of V. Eighteen years later they have arrived at their full maturity with the publication of this admirable volume by Thomas H. Schaub. Pynchon: The Voice of Ambiguity is not only the finest work available on its subject, it is also a distinguished and wide-ranging study whose implications should be felt in many other fields. Schaub's book is one of the most sophisticated and original examples of recent criticism that focuses on the reader's response to literature; what distinguishes Schaub from other practitioners of this method is his commitment to the author as well as to the reader. He demonstrates what many critics have already suggested in more tentative ways—that Pynchon is unique among contemporary writers in the way his work specifically implicates the reader, both in the act of reading itself and, far more significantly, in the effect his books can have on the way a reader thinks, feels, and acts.

Schaub's book is a model of how literary studies ought to be written. It is wise, lucid, well-informed, intellectually ambitious while modest in style and manner, untempted by irrelevance or obsession, and continually illuminating. Schaub approaches all of Pynchon's work from a single perspective, which he neatly identifies in his subtitle. That is, he reads the novels and stories in terms of their increasingly direct, but also increasingly ambiguous, address to the reader, an address that requires the reader to choose for himself the terms and tendencies of his interpretation. Schaub's commitment to the author prevents him from supposing that these readerly choices are made in terms provided by the reader alone, or that interpretation is a matter of free play or cultivated misreading. Instead, Schaub details the ways Pynchon demands specific choices with general implications. In a critic of lesser gifts, a single critical perspective might lead to narrowness. In Schaub, the result is a brilliantly successful demon-
stration of Pynchon's range and coherence—those two qualities that, combined, characterize all great writers of every age.

This is a short book, but its brevity is deceptive. In fewer than 150 pages of text Schaub touches on virtually every aspect of Pynchon's work that readers have found significant, and points toward aspects that no one else seems to have noticed. What makes it possible for Schaub to accomplish so much without ever turning breathless or hasty is the centrality of his approach; one finishes the book with a sense that fewer loose ends are left trailing from the novel than are left by other critics. Schaub identifies the ways in which Pynchon's special "Orphic voice" (as he calls it in his chapters on Gravity's Rainbow) is unlike the more traditional intrusive narrator who provides a fixed source of knowledge, and also unlike the self-enclosing voice of Modernism which replaces a lost continuity in the world with an imposed continuity of form. Pynchon's voice, "which fills the world it describes instead of attempting to speak to us from a Jamesian vantage outside the world," is deliberately unstable, deliberately a source of fragments of meaning that we are free to connect if we wish, and free to leave disassembled if we prefer openness and disarray. (Like many critics of recent literature, Schaub somewhat overstates the differences between the ambiguities of his own author and the fixities of earlier ones—for example, Stephen Dedalus can not be said to find a home, as Schaub says he does—but this in no way invalidates his basic argument.) Pynchon's voice offers no final answers, not even the aesthetic or joking answers of late Modernism: "Value, for Pynchon, always lies at the interface among systems, where choices continue to be made, where there is uncertainty, and where if we value anything at all, it is the way we want it to be." The force of this sentence may be best understood by placing a slight emphasis on the word always.

Schaub's approach might be described as a uniquely powerful algorithm for solving critical and interpretive problems. He is able to use it as effectively in solving local difficulties as he is in clarifying large questions of substance and style, or to explain the changes in Pynchon's work from one book to the next. He elucidates Pynchon's "development from a
silent presence behind V. to the 'audible' song of Gravity's Rainbow," and shows how that development parallels "a decreasing dependence on any semblance of sequential plot." As the author does less of the work of linking various elements in his books, the reader is quite literally called upon to make the connections instead. Schaub himself, to some extent, also eschews a traditional critical plot. He devotes little space to V. and sets his main discussion of it near the middle of his study, because Pynchon's first novel tends to require fewer and simpler choices than do the later ones. Schaub begins his analysis (after a crisply lucid introduction) with a chapter on The Crying of Lot 49, a book in which the one-or-zero choices are easily defined but enormously complex in their significance. After the chapter on Lot 49, the remainder of the book is devoted mostly to tracing the significance of these and similar choices in Gravity's Rainbow.

Schaub's account of Lot 49 is as illuminating as it is compact. As he moves from subject to subject—from entropy to information to revelation to the final mystery of the Tristero—he traces the precise shifts in Oedipa's, and our own, understanding of the data she perceives. "As the world around her takes on more and more the character of information, Oedipa's evidence seems less like truth than clue to something beyond it." He suggests that the book "may be read as a tragic account of the difficulty of human action in a world whose meanings are always either our own or just beyond our reach." Yet even as Schaub writes this, he recognizes that the word "tragic" tells only half the ambiguous story. It is the very ambiguity of Oedipa's quest that keeps it from ending as a decisive tragedy, and that opens other possibilities instead:

If hope exists at all, it is the ability to withstand the terrible ambiguity threatening Oedipa. . . . Her position is isolated and filled with a paranoia more protective than psychotic. Yet with Oedipa we experience a broadening of consciousness, and a sense of the possibility for meanings which inhere in the world and in language. Those meanings . . . depend for their vitality on the suspension in which they are caught.
— and that suspension "echoes the experience beyond our reading." Throughout this chapter, as throughout his book, Schaub maintains an unrivalled sensitivity to Pynchon's tone, and he consistently acknowledges details that complicate easy answers. Schaub's conclusions on the degree of affirmation present in The Crying of Lot 49 differ greatly from the less ambiguous conclusions I published on the same subject some years ago; I think Schaub's conclusions are the right ones.

The major test of anyone who writes about Pynchon is his ability to keep his balance in the rough seas and buffeting gales of Gravity's Rainbow. Schaub always keeps his head above water. He opens his account of the novel with the basic epistemological issue of the world-as-image, especially the new "false images that move" in film. From this he moves outward to the book's psychological tensions between "a continuity which is real but inaccessible and the [bureaucratic or paranoid] continuities which are accessible and false"—a tension made manifest in the ambiguous status of such archetypal patterns as the mandala. (Schaub provides a valuable mandala-diagram combining all the various cruciform and circular patterns of the book, and its various directional indicators, in one clearly laid-out page.) From these structures in space he turns to the extended structures in time described by Max Weber, structures that tend to stabilize and rationalize the energies of ambiguity and hope. But Schaub then counters this tendency by discussing the islands of possibility and freedom that occur in conscious choice and deliberate variety, the islands signposted by the insistent question, "Which do you want it to be?" And he concludes the chapter with the culminating ambiguity of Slothrop's disintegration and the disintegration of the novel's plot—a scattering that also may initiate a spiritual resurrection in the Orpheus Theatre in the final pages. This whole discussion is a tour de force of coherence and inclusiveness. Schaub links the ambiguity of psychological integration, where the integrated self is thereby divided from other types of continuity, with the ambiguity of social organization that simultaneously stifles and connects, and links these ambiguities to that of Pynchon's style, which deliberately burdens a character like Slothrop with meanings he is never quite able to carry.
Schaub makes it look easy to be lucid about ambiguity—although anyone who has tried it knows how difficult this task really is. He pointedly shows how *Gravity's Rainbow* itself "undermines the temptation to read the book as a Manichean allegory" in which all the ambiguities sort themselves out at last. He manages to find the unity hidden in the "apparent contradiction between ideas and drama" that pervades Pynchon's style. He understands that Pynchon's historical fictions are serious play, that they depend on the recognition that "the histories men write are a linguistic membrane between us and what really happened, but a tissue without which there would be no connection at all." He sees the purpose of Pynchon's notoriously mixed style, a style that discovers "in the most ludicrous that which is most important." And he emphasizes repeatedly the one argument that links all these matters together, the argument that "meaning in Pynchon is always a medium, not an answer," a medium through which to understand the world made by our choices.

Schaub's final chapter demonstrates that he is as perceptive a critic of other writers as he is of Pynchon. He deftly outlines what he calls "Pynchon's company," that group of writers who share Pynchon's seriousness of aim and his common manner, and who share his specifically political "affirmation of variety." These writers include Richard Fariña, M. F. Beal, Tom Robbins, Peter Matthiessen, and Ishmael Reed. I wish he hadn't included William S. Burroughs, but I understand why he did. (He might have added Don DeLillo instead.) While acknowledging Pynchon as the best of these, Schaub also honors their variety by naming their individual virtues, just as he identifies the compelling immediacy of their common concerns.

Throughout his six chapters Schaub is simultaneously alert to the dark disintegrating aspects of Pynchon's work and sensitive to its summons to integration and communion. This summons is more complex and important a matter even than the literary unity of Pynchon's books themselves or of their unity with an American tradition. It is a matter that Schaub points to when he writes, "The real world of the reader is a part of Pynchon's fiction; the two, which at first seem so far apart, become inseparable in the act of informed
reading." To connect the book and the world, in such a way that neither dominates the other, is the most compelling and difficult task of literary criticism, of "informed reading." And the criticism Schaub provides for Pynchon is as informed and sympathetic as an author can hope to receive. As Schaub says in another context, this informed reading that brings book and world together "is the benign aspect of our study and participates not so much in the 'routinization' of Pynchon's writing as in the community conjured by his song." This sentence may stand as an accurate and eloquent description of Schaub's accomplishment.

Columbia University
Approach and Avoid: 
Douglas A. Mackey's The Rainbow Quest of Thomas Pynchon
Donald F. Larsson


One phenomenon which Pynchon enthusiasts within academia are surely aware of, and even participate in, but which has not received much written consideration, is Pynchon's popular appeal. Pynchon enjoys a special status shared by only a few other writers, yet it is a contradictory status: too ribald, anarchic and steeped in popular culture to be acceptable to many traditional literary academics, he is also too complex, dense and steeped in esoterica and western intellectual history to be easily lumped with other popular but more accessible writers, such as Kurt Vonnegut or Tom Robbins. Nonetheless, Pynchon remains a source of fascination to academics and non-academics both, and there is a need for criticism which will address the needs of both audiences.

Douglas A. Mackey's The Rainbow Quest of Thomas Pynchon seems to have been commissioned to satisfy such needs. The book is number 28 in the Milford Series, "Popular Writers of Today," which includes works on a number of science fiction authors, and other popular writers such as John D. MacDonald and Alistair MacLean, as well as some mainstream authors with affinities for popular culture, such as Anthony Burgess and John Hawkes. I am not familiar with these other volumes and so can offer no comparison, but taken on its own, Mackey's book is likely to disappoint both the professional and the amateur reader of Pynchon.

By far the greatest flaw in the book is its brevity. Mackey attempts to cover all of Pynchon's works, from the short stories on, in a mere sixty-five pages. Such length might be acceptable for a monograph on one part of Pynchon's career or one aspect of his works, but in its present length it cannot do justice to any of the works or themes. Even as the most basic kind of introduction to Pynchon,
the book falls short. Mackey's summaries of the short stories are competent, but he ignores the sub-plot of "The Secret Integration" and omits any mention of "The Small Rain" or "Under the Rose"; more importantly, he does not significantly link the stories, either historically, by tracing Pynchon's development as a writer, or thematically, by showing how the stories are related through such important but barely introduced topics as entropy and paranoia. In explicating the narratives of the three novels, Mackey is also competent enough, yet the beginning reader of *V.* is likely to find Mackey's account confusing, since it deals with *V.*'s adventures in chronological order, without reference to the order of the chapters involved. Again, though, failure to make and develop connections is the important flaw. It is not clear whether Mackey is intent only on explication or if he has some larger purpose in mind. He jumps from plot summaries to considerations of various elements in the novels, but with no particular reason given for stressing those aspects of the novels over others. Though his bibliography does list many of the most important works on Pynchon, it is unclear exactly how deeply Mackey is indebted to them; for example, his book does tend to cover much of the same ground as Joseph Slade's *Thomas Pynchon*.

One may also disagree with a number of Mackey's interpretations and readings. He does not explain character relationships in *V.*, well, notably ignoring Rachel Owlglass's passage toward humanity and away from mechanization under the influence of Paola. His reference to Oedipa's seeing the Tristero post horn everywhere does not place it in the context of her dark night of the soul during her wanderings through San Francisco, and his suggestion that the post horn is symbolic of Gabriel's trumpet ignores the fact that it is muted. His discussion of the rocket limericks attributes them only to American G.I.'s and does not note that they are sung by engineers sent to work on the rocket.

These are fairly minor flaws, though, and would stand out less sharply in a longer book, but they are not balanced by whatever else Mackey has to offer. This is a pity, because Mackey seems to be an intelligent reader. He brings some fresh references to his discussions of the novels, and some are potentially
quite exciting. He invokes Erich Neumann's The Great Mother in discussing the archetypal values of the lady V., and cites Marc Edmund Jones's The Profane Mysteries as a way of dealing with the ritual elements of the Tristero in The Crying of Lot 49. His discussion of these sources, though, is—again—much too short to be convincing; either of these works has the potential for a full-length article in it, but Mackey gives each only a few paragraphs. In fact, Mackey's critical strategy seems to copy Stencil's policy of "approach and avoid." Just as he latches on to an interesting source or idea, he lets it go in order to move on.

This "strategy" is also evident in Mackey's discussion of Gravity's Rainbow. He has a number of interesting, if not necessarily new, things to say about the book's structure, the narrative voice, and the use of film, but again fails to develop any of these notions in a meaningful manner. He approaches a discussion of the relationship of Gravity's Rainbow with the reader—perhaps the most important consideration in dealing with that novel—yet at the last minute avoids a concrete definition of how that relationship works, except to say that it makes us "re-examine the whole structure of our experiencing apparatus" (38). The question left begging is what the form and purpose of that re-examination might be. Similarly, though he reads the book—correctly, I think—as ultimately affirmative, he avoids the hard questions the book poses. In stating that there is "no innately evil adversary but our own ignorance of the innate universal basis of all existence" (52), Mackey states a basic truth but avoids the concrete political and metaphysical context in which Pynchon sets this message. The identification of European society as death-oriented, the placement of humanity as "God's spoilers," and the characterization of activities on the "Other Side" of life show Mackey's formulation to be too simplistic. Finally, to return to the reader, Mackey does not deal forcefully with how Gravity's Rainbow should change our lives.

Potentially, much of the material in Mackey's book could be expanded and thus lead to some fresh and exciting discussions, but this present volume cannot do so. The text is more than an introduction, and so cannot be the kind of basic tool needed by the beginner,
but it is also less than a full discussion of Pynchon, and so cannot be of much use to the advanced or academic reader of Pynchon. It is the latter project to which Mackey seems most drawn; but the length of his book frustrates such efforts. The project of development, linkage, and definition should be approached and completed, or be avoided altogether.

Mankato State University
Notes

The editors of Pynchon Notes will hold an informal social and scholarly meeting by courtesy, though without official sanction, of the Modern Language Association at its 1981 annual convention in New York: Monday, December 28, 6:00 - 7:15 p.m., Hilton 529. See Editorial, p. 4 above.

John Guzlowski and Lynn DeVore announce the launching of their new journal, Pynchon Studies:

Our plans are for a fifty-page, twice-annual publication that will feature articles (maximum length, 18 pages) on Pynchon with occasional pieces on his contemporaries. The editorial board consists of David Cowart, Charles B. Harris, Edward Mendelson, William Plater, Thomas Schaub, and Joseph Slade. Subscriptions are priced at $4.00 per two-issue volume. We expect to have our first issue out in the Spring of 1982. Contributions should be accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Contributions or subscriptions should be sent to either

John Guzlowski
Dept. of English
Eastern Illinois University
Charleston, IL 61920

or

Lynn DeVore
Dept. of English
Illinois State University
Normal, IL 61761
Bibliography

We would like to remind our readers that they are invited to contribute bibliographic information about bibliographies, dissertations, books, chapters, essays, articles, reviews, interviews, translations, newspaper and magazine stories, fragments, oddments, stray comments, conference papers, and anything else of the sort which seems significant, interesting, or otherwise valuable and worthy of wider publicity with specific reference to Pynchon. We also welcome news of work in progress, circulating manuscripts, and forthcoming works.

SUPPORT NOTICE BY PYNCHON:


CRITICISM AND COMMENT:


Passing references compare Pynchon's achievement (for the most part, unfavorably) with those of Nabokov, West and others, and a number of film-makers.


"[O]ur reclusive novelists' works are written against the grain of the ordinary. Their insistent complexity or mystery comes from the novelist's ability to transcend personality, to assume many identities, speak many voices."


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Trans. into Hebrew by Gideon Toury as the introduction to Toury's translation of "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna." (Siman Kri'a, 14 (1981), 143-46.)


The original contributions to this volume are:


"Pynchon's Names: Some Further Considerations." Pynchon Notes, 6 (1981), 41-43.


"[I]t is Kafka's ambivalent legacy of play and madness that defines the narrative space in which unfold our most contemporary fictions."


"In his comic parodies of knowledge in an age of data processing, Pynchon has brilliantly succeeded in relating science to the artist's vision of tragedy and human ambiguity."


Thompson characterizes some of his own historical speculation as "Pynchonesque scholarship."


Werner, Craig. Untitled article on fiction of the 70's. Images, 9, No. 1 (1980), 3-5. (4)

"The one indisputably major novelist of a 'younger generation' is Thomas Pynchon."

"Revol. of The Grim Phoenix: Reconstructing Thomas Pynchon, by William M. Plater,


In The Crying of Lot 49, "[m]odernist paradox gives way to postmodern quandary, to suspensiveness, and, for those who cannot accept chaos, to the need for an order far more limited than any imagined by the modernists . . ."

Willis, Susan. "A Literary Lesson in Historical Thinking." Social Text, 3 (1980), 136-43. (142-43)

In The Crying of Lot 49, Pynchon’s "language suggests, but does not explain the commodification of human life."


RECENT PAPERS:

The following papers were presented at the Midwest Popular Culture Conference, October 22-24, 1981, in Columbus, Ohio.

Calendrillo, Linda. "V. and the Classical Spy Novel."

DeVore, Lynn. "In the Zone: Pynchon and Vietnam."

Guzlowski, John. "'The Shadow' and The Crying of Lot 49."

FORTHCOMING:

Cowart, David. Rev. of Pynchon: The Voice of Ambiguity, by Thomas H. Schaub. JEGP.

Ellison, Harlan. Interview [conducted by David Cowart]. Contemporary Authors, New Rev. Ser., Vol. IV.

"Pynchon calls me from time to time. Every time he calls me he gets me in trouble."

Original contributions include:
Poenicke, Klaus. "Senex, Puer, Pikaro und *Die Enden der Parabel.*"

Selected Bibliography

The collection also includes previously published works or translations of previously published works by Heinz Ickstadt, David Leverenz, W. T. Lhamon, Lance W. Ozier, Tony Tanner, Mathew Winston, Lawrence C. Wolfley.


WORK IN PROGRESS:

Contributors

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The editors would also like to thank the following for their contributions to this issue of Pynchon Notes: Beverly Clark, David Cowart, Bernard Duyfhuizen, John Guzowski, Brian McHale, Clifford Mead, David Mesher, Thomas Piltz, Penelope Price, Laura Provenzano, Yoshiaki Sato, David Seed, Joseph Slade, and Craig Werner.