PYNCHON NOTES

10 October 1982

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Every writer draws—in one way or another—on the work of other writers. Few thoughts are ever really original, and so most thought is a strand in an intricate net extending backwards in time, until in some remote region of the past we pass from literature to myth. I would like to untangle one knot, or better still one tiny part of such a knot, in some detail. I shall argue that two episodes in Thomas Pynchon's novel V.\(^1\) show a direct indebtedness to Edgar Allan Poe. Moreover, it is no coincidence that these episodes are Foppl's siege party in the chapter "Mondaugen's Story" (which I link with "The Mask of the Red Death"\(^2\)), and the Vheissu affair (which I shall connect with The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket\(^3\)); the two pairings, I shall argue, are interdependent.

Two Parties: Folly at Foppl's and Prospero's

Both Foppl's party and Prospero's, in the "Mask," are staged during a siege. With Prospero it is the Red Death, and with Foppl a Bondel rebellion, that in each case drives a number of the ruling class into forced seclusion. "When his dominions were half depopulated, he summoned to his presence a thousand hale and light-hearted friends from among the knights and dames of his court, and with these retired to the deep seclusion of one of his castellated abbeys" (M., 269). Foppl is forced to undertake similar measures: "'Bolt the doors, seal the windows, tear down the plank bridges and distribute arms. Tonight we enter a state of siege!'" (V., 217). At both courts, life seems to pass in more or less the same vein: "There were buffoons, there were improvisatori, there were ballet-dancers, there were musicians, there was Beauty, there was wine" (M., 269). "Boisterous were the parties, lively the music, jolly the girls" (V,
Furthermore, both hosts seem to have had the same interior decorator. At Poppl's place, Mondaugen enters "a tiny unfurnished room hung all in black velvet, high as the house, narrowing into a chimney and open at the top" (V, 221). Had he been at Prospero's place, he might have wandered off into a similar apartment, "closely shrouded in black velvet tapestries that hung all over the ceiling and down the walls, falling in heavy folds upon a carpet of the same material and hue" (M, 270). Pynchon thus builds up a close analogy between his text and Poe's, both in the structure of the plot and in the creation of atmosphere; furthermore, he takes over the symbolic structure of his source. Poe's color symbolism, especially the centrality of redness, is hinted at recurrently, as in the "patch or pool of deep red" (V, 218) which Mondaugen notices in the courtyard of Poppl's farm. Pynchon also alludes to the theme of death which so preoccupies Poe, although a different, more subtle death invades Poppl's place. After some weeks, the company is reduced: "Easily a third of their number were bedridden: several . . . had died" (V, 258).

In both texts, there is the assumption that this trend will go on until total decadence, carrying with it total death, has taken over. In Pynchon's version, it is not one particular mask, but masks themselves—masking—that cause death. (We might also recall Pynchon's Fasching motif.) During the long dying in both narratives, the time that is running out is marked by clocks in the text: in Poe, the grand clock in the black apartment; in Pynchon, Vera Meroving has an artificial Dali-eye-clock.

We will come back to this set of stories at the end. First, a more detailed description of the other set.

The Hollow Globe: A Theory

In 1818, a certain Captain Symmes proposed "that the earth, formed by rotation, consisted of five concentric spheres with access through 'holes at the Poles' so wide that a voyager 'might pass from the outer side . . . over the rim and down upon the inner side a great distance before becoming aware of the fact at all.' He called for 'one hundred brave com-
companions' to hop off from Siberia to the North Pole to find 'a warm and rich land stocked with thrifty vegetables and animals, if not men . . ."". This speculative description soon became known as the theory of "Symmes's hole," and it was a topic of considerable discussion in circles interested in the scientific and the fantastic--circles which included both Poe and Jules Verne. The connections among Symmes, Poe, and Verne are manifold. Verne wrote an ending to Poe's story, "Le Sphinx des Glaces," and commented at length in his *Journey to the Center of the Earth* on Humboldt and Davy, two people whom Symmes contacted with the hope of interesting them in the expedition he was planning. It seems certain, then, that both Poe and Verne were very familiar with the theory, which views the globe as a place whose structure is verifiable by exploration of the interior.

Poe's narrative of Pym relies heavily and directly on the theory. The ending can only be properly understood if one presupposes a "something" on or under the Pole. Seen in this light, a quotation from Pynchon also takes on a deeper meaning. Godolphin says that in Vheissu "'dreams are not, not closer to the waking world, but somehow, I think, they do seem more real'" (V, 155-56). Joel D. Black has shown that Pynchon is very aware of the "living world" theory, and, if one assumes that he also knows about Symmes's theory (very likely, as he draws directly from Pym), there is a direct explanation of the phenomenon evoked in the description of Vheissu. Dreams can be more real in Vheissu because they are dreamt nearer to the core of the earth, where the final truth lies hidden.

The fact that the inhabitants of Vheissu do indeed live underground, or at least know about the inside of the globe, is explicitly stated, albeit by a suspect informant. "'Having explored the volcanoes of their own region . . . certain natives of the Vheissu district were the first to become aware of these tunnels, which lace the earth's interior at depths varying--'" (V, 181). Later: "'Tell me what Vheissu is really the code name for. Tell me, you idiot, what I already know: that it stands for Vesuvius'" (V, 181).

It is also asserted that this network extends to
the Polar region: "... a barbaric and unknown race, employed by God knows whom, are even now blasting the Antarctic ice with dynamite, preparing to enter a subterranean network of natural tunnels, a network whose existence is known only to the inhabitants of Vheissu, the Royal Geographic Society in London, Herr Godolphin, and the spies of Florence" (V, 181). Numerous links connect Vheissu to Verne's underground realm. There are tunnels, and also frequent mention of volcanoes: "And there are Volcanoes with cities inside them which once every hundred years erupt into flaming hell but people go to live in them anyway" (V, 177). These evoke at once Verne's expedition, in which Lidenbrock, a German scholar (cf. "Herr" Godolphin) and his nephew also begin their journey in the North, penetrating into the interior of Earth's crust by entering at the crater of the volcano Snæfells, in Iceland. They then move through a lush, warm, densely vegetated underground region to the South, namely Sicily, where they are spat out, like the cities in Vheissu, because of the sudden eruption of a volcano identified as Stromboli (the third important Italian volcano, besides Vesuvius and Aetna). We have, then, (in Pym, V., and Verne's Journey) a set of three expeditions, all concerned with an underground realm, and all going from the extreme North to the South. There are other similarities.

Vheissu/Tsalal: The Topography

Godolphin, only explorer of Vheissu, future member of Poppo's crew, explains to Victoria Wren in Florence how Vheissu is reached: "... on camel-back over a vast tundra, past the dolmens and temples of dead cities; finally to the banks of a broad river which never sees the sun, so thickly roofed is it with foliage. The river is traveled in long teak boats which are carved like dragons and paddled by brown men whose language is unknown to all but themselves. In eight days' time there is a portage over a neck of treacherous swampland to a green lake, and across the lake rise the first foothills of the mountains which ring Vheissu" (V, 153). This description, I would argue (aware of the danger of caballing caries), is a carefully constructed collage of several interwoven
topoi. It is a stylized journey from the extreme North to the extreme South (see also Mondaugen's North/South obsession\textsuperscript{10}), and a journey through parts of South America mingled with exotic elements. At the same time, of course, it is the route to Vheissu per se.

The first sentence of the description evokes the region of the North Pole and the coldness of the adjacent region; but it also evokes Peru, where one travels on llamas, guanacos or vicuñas—all species closely related to the camel. The traveler to Vheissu also passes the remnants of dead cultures that immediately bring to mind the lost cultures of the Incas, complete with their burial rites and dolmens. The highlands of the Andean Cordilleras are, furthermore, in large parts "tundra"-like in their vegetation and climate. Then one travels further on the river, through a warmer, more exotic climate: a tropical region or even below the Equator. The exotic aspect is stressed by the introduction of teak boats that are dragon-shaped, belonging to an Indian or Indonesian civilization. But on our South American scale, it might well be a journey first on the Pilcomayo River, then the Paraná, through tropical country, and then later on the Rio de la Plata, leading to Buenos Aires, through extensive swampland. The climate here again gets colder, and the landscape more mountainous. On both parallel journeys, we have reached the border of Antarctica, land of polar climate. Furthermore, we can make an analogy between the green lake and the Arctic Sea, known for its sometimes intense green color, which is due to ice. Significantly, the area around Buenos Aires is also the most northerly region where floating ice is still encountered.

From there on, the journey closely resembles an expedition to the Pole. "Native guides will only go a short distance into these mountains. Soon they will turn back, pointing out the way. Depending on the weather, it is one to two more weeks over moraine, sheer granite and hard blue ice before the borders of Vheissu are reached" (V, 153-54). We have here the ring of mountains that surround Antarctica, and then the expedition is on its own, struggling to reach the
Pole. The borders of Vheissu are, then, the Pole itself, or better, the rim of the hole that forms the access to it. But Vheissu, like Captain Symmes's country, is tropical, and so one could also construct yet another journey that remains inside South America, ending, perhaps, somewhere in the icy mountains of Bolivia. The description of the journey is anything but geographically clear-cut. It is a bricolage of several themes, combining tropical elements of South America with a stylized journey from Pole to Pole, interspersed with possibly Asian set-scenes.

Vheissu itself shows close parallels to Tsalal, Pym's last station before he reaches the polar region. (Godolphin also comes to the Pole after Vheissu.) To get to Tsalal one has to cross terrain like that which is near Vheissu, and to crawl over "... large shapeless blocks of the black granite" (N, 230). Like Vheissu, it is an unexplored region: "At every step we took inland the conviction forced itself upon us that we were in a country differing essentially from any hitherto visited by civilized men" (N, 193). The reports that strengthened Symmes's conviction about his theory of "warmer water and contrary migration of birds near the poles" also hold true here, as in Vheissu: "No ice whatever was to be seen... Indeed, the temperature of the water was here far too warm" (N, 235).

Almost everything in V., then, serves to build up an analogy between Vheissu and the countries imagined by Symmes and Poe. The motif of the journey, the warm climate near the Pole and the unexplored countries of Tsalal and Vheissu all point to a close connection among the different concepts. But it is never a clear correspondence. Pynchon takes pains to create one of his virtually open statements into which at first sight almost every association can fit (as with the letter-title V. itself). Only after a close scrutiny does one realize that the effect was a carefully planned one, and anything but vague. Pynchon has succeeded in creating a parallel country without sacrificing its individuality and uniqueness. We have numerous topographical links between Vheissu and the Pole and Tsalal and the Pole, Vheissu and Tsalal, and
the "Underground." However, it is not just the countries that are alike; a closer look at the respective inhabitants reveals further similarities.

Vheissu/Tsalal: The Inhabitants

Neither literary country can live up to the pleasant expectations of Captain Symmes, who expected to find a "warm and rich land stocked with thrifty vegetables and animals, if not men." Pym is soon forced to remark that ". . . the islanders for whom we entertained such inordinate feelings of esteem, were among the most barbarous, subtle, and bloodthirsty wretches that ever contaminated the face of the globe" (N, 205). Godolphin also experiences this shift from goodness to depravity. "'And you would be in love with her [a woman of Vheissu].' 'At first. But soon that skin, the gaudy godawful riot of pattern and color, would begin to get between you and whatever it was in her that you thought you loved. . . . To flay that tattooing to a heap of red, purple and green debris, leave the veins and ligaments raw and quivering and open at last to your eyes and your touch''' (V, 156).

Indeed, Vheissu, like Tsalal, is "'hardly a restful place. There's barbarity, insurrection, internecine feud. It's no different from any other godforsakenly remote region''' (V, 155). The dangers in both countries are also directly responsible for the reduction of the expeditions from twelve members (in Pym's case) and thirteen (in Godolphin's case) to three in both narratives. Godolphin describes the three survivors. "'It was bad country. Thirteen of us went in and three came out. Myself, my second-in-command, and a civilian whose name I have forgotten and who so far as I know has vanished from the earth without a trace''' (V, 157). Pym escapes with his comrade Peters and a native with the name of Nu-Nu.

The two groups of survivors can be split up into three pairs that are almost equivalent. Pym and Godolphin, the leaders of their respective expeditions, both go on to the Pole. The civilian and Nu-Nu seem marginal to their expeditions, and are stigmatized, one by being a civilian, the other by being a native of the hostile Tsalal; both die, or at least vanish permanently. Also, Pym's Peters and Godolphin's second-in-command share a fate of remarkable similarity.
Peters is now "a resident of Illinois" who "cannot be met with at present" (N, 240). The sinister implication of his mysterious seclusion is mirrored in Godolphin's equally ominous statement—reluctantly made—which implies that some disease, or perhaps madness, struck his second-in-command: "He is, he is in hospital. Retired now" (V, 157).

A Color Theory

Colors form a very important symbolic sub-structure in both journeys. Godolphin remarks on Vheissu's colors and their disquieting aspects. "The colors. So many colors. . . . As if you lived inside a madman's kaleidoscope!" (V, 155). He mentions the "iridescent" (V, 155), changing pattern, and the resulting desire to "flay that tattooing to a heap of red, purple and green debris." Finally, the fur of the spider monkey that he finds buried in the South Pole ice is "still rainbow-colored" (V, 189). Both stories rely heavily on a dichotomy of color vs. whiteness. In Poe, these extremes are worked out in the juxtaposition of the colorful, exotic civilization of Tsalal with its fear of anything white, and the whiteness of the polar region and the shrouded human figure. The inhabitants of Tsalal not only fear anything white, they also do not have anything white; even their teeth, as Pym remarks, are black. "Teke li-li" is their special word for their white-aversion. The impossibility of combining different colors to produce white is even expressed in the nature of their country. The expedition encounters a river: "It was not colorless, nor was it of any one uniform color—presenting to the eye, as it flowed, every possible shade of purple, like the hues of a changeable silk. . . . It was made up of a number of distinct veins, each of a distinct hue . . . these veins did not com—mingle" (N, 194). In Pynchon, it is the color of Vheissu that clashes with the whiteness of the polar ice (in the spider monkey episode, for example). But the analogies are even more elaborate.

Rudolf Arnheim, in his book Art and Visual Perception, deals at length with colors, their composition and their relations, including generative complementsaries, "colors that in combination produce a monochromatic white or gray." Using its schema and
taking a closer look at the "debris" that Godolphin's grim imaginings evoke ("flay that tattooing to a heap of red, purple and green"), we see that these can be split up into red, the color of blood (separated from the other colors by a comma), and green and purple, which together form a complementary pair. Beneath the analogies of complementarity and separation lies the paradoxical idea that a coat of colors both hides the final truth and, at the same time, adds up to it.  

This is a compressed image of the "mockery of life": the (perhaps false) image of colorful change and vitality, which carries in itself (deceptively) its own negation, the seed of the final truth, the possibility of final annihilation in/into whiteness. In Poe, it is the white specter, and in Pynchon the spider monkey, unable to hide its own "nothingness" under its rainbow-color disguise, that expound this paradoxical relation of color and whiteness, the hues of life and annihilation. Godolphin feels that "Until Vheissu. It was not till the Southern Expedition last year that I saw what was beneath her skin. . . . Nothing. . . . It was Nothing I saw" (V, 188). It should be noted that the colors of the rainbow also recreate white light when passed again through a prism.

Both stories, then, share an intricate color symbolism based on the juxtaposition of color and whiteness, of life and annihilation. One is almost tempted to reinterpret Poe's Tsalal in Pynchon's vein now, as that which is really inside the globe: the horrible country--horrible beyond words--behind the shrouded figure.

The Final Integration

We are faced, at this point, with a proliferation of parallels, but the whole labor still seems Sysyphian and dead: a mere shuffling of quotations. We haven't yet touched the real integration.

It is again Godolphin who puts Vheissu in a relation to the overall structure and theme of V.: "'Everyone has an Antarctic!' (V, 224), he says, implying a confrontation of the individual with the "Nothing," but at the same time he realizes that "'The discretion, the sense of comedy about the Vheissu affair are with us no more, our Vheissus are no longer our own, or
even confined to a circle of friends; they're public property" (V, 230). Vheissu was "a luxury, an indulgence" (V, 230). He makes these statements, significantly, during Poppl's siege, when he is a member of the surrounded party. Pynchon puts this siege into direct relation to Vheissu, when he has Vera Meroving urge Godolphin, "Don't you see? This siege. It's Vheissu. It's finally happened" (V, 230). Thus, a paradox emerges about Vheissu and the siege: Vheissu is the siege, yet there is "No time for pranks. No more Vheissus" (V, 231).

It is no coincidence that Godolphin turns up at Poppl's place. And likewise, it is no coincidence that Poppl's siege is the other episode in V closely connected to Poe's work, to his "Mask." To unravel this connection, one has to recall one of the major concepts in V: the concept of virtù. Very roughly, an act of virtù implies a direct relation between the individual that acts, the act and the one acted upon. At its best, the act constitutes the formative deed of the individual. Its possibility is something that Poppl could still experience in 1904, and the loss of which he mourns later. It is a feeling one could have before assassination has given way to genocidal annihilation. It is still a cruel concept, of course, and extremely dangerous if misunderstood. The fact that Pynchon draws explicitly from Machiavelli (who has also been widely and often misunderstood, whether on virtù or on other issues) shows that Pynchon is aware of the explosiveness of the concept and the danger contained in it. An act of virtù can very well involve the death of the opponent, but it still remains humane—humane in that it still implies a direct relationship between actor, action and victim. Whether the act is moral is a different question altogether. Virtù is a substructure to morality. It does not promise a Utopia of "virtuous" men; all it promises is a more direct, honest relation between friends and enemies. The very fact that a moral judgment can still be made about such a relation is the crucial fact. Different "levels" of "moral energy" still exist in such a relation, as is not the case with Decadence and Entropy. Poppl's reminiscences are Breughel-like tapestries of such acts.
Pynchon's point is that the possibility of such acts of virtù has died out. The mechanization of every aspect of life has taken from us this relation; we are living in an age of annihilation and mass-murder by remote-control, and we live by a press-the-button philosophy. Old Stencil remarks on this degeneration: "There were no more princes. Henceforth politics would become progressively more democratized, more thrown into the hands of amateurs. The disease would progress" (V, 461). Godolphin likewise has commented on this very shift. Vheissu has become the siege, but Vheissu is now a communal Vheissu, which is a contradiction in terms. By definition the act of virtù must be purely personal; communal virtù is unthinkable. Godolphin then ends up in Foppl's parody-universe, hopeless, depraved and perverted, fleeing into yet another act of virtù. In his seventies now, he tortures one of Foppl's slaves: "Below, dancing about the body and flicking its buttocks with a sjambok, was old Godolphin. Vera Meroving stood by his side and they appeared to have exchanged clothing. Godolphin, keeping time with the sjambok, launched quaveringly into a reprise of Down by the Summertime Sea" (V, 259). He isn't aware—or is he—that somewhere along the line virtù has gone sour. (Or to use pynchon's wording, "has run afoul.") Time has changed for Pynchon, somewhere around that magical date 1900. No more "virtù"-ous, lonely confrontations of the individual with another individual, or even with a clearly defined horror are possible. No more expeditions to Vheissu or the Pole. The story of Pym serves Pynchon, then, as being about one of these last acts of virtù. But now, at Foppl's siege, Poe's "Red Death" has taken over: the total annihilation of the masses and modern warfare, to be watched from Foppl's terrace by the decadent assemblage, far away and unrelated: "they could see everything spread out in panorama, as if for their amusement. . . . Doubtless there were human voices down there, uttering cries of command, triumph, pain; but at this distance only the tiny pop-pop of gunshots could be heard" (V, 256). But as with Prospero's partygoers, sly Death finds a way. For Pynchon, it is not the plague that comes, but another, equally horrible and indiscriminate sickness: decadence itself (see also "V. in Love"), which levels
all human feelings, helping to bring on the entropic end-predicament of mankind.

Pym is still on the other side of this levelling. Harold Beaver's characterization of Pym's tale as a perfect paradigm of the heroic, tragic individual is interesting in this context. The last image of "the Prince" is that "the whole narrative tips like a see-saw, descending from an innocent prank--and flirtation with death--to cold, murderous, savage annihilation."15 (Other images of "the Prince" in V. are the English pilots in "Valletta," who exactly fit the description of movie-cliché men of virtù, cliches of which Pynchon makes much more frequent use.)

Old Stencil, the one who presumably met V., or who at least shares a secret knowledge of her ("There is more behind and inside V. than any of us had suspected. Not who, but what: what is she. God grant that I may never be called upon to write the answer, either here or in any official report"
[V, 43]), still belongs to the privileged generation of those who had experienced the hope and possibility of virtù. V. may be horrifying, and to write down her final identity may mean death (as, presumably, description of the shrouded figure in Pym or the country behind it is), but V. at least is "real." Godolphin also belongs to the generation of Old Stencil. But Old Stencil is dead, and Vheissu has by now turned into a bedtime story for young Evan Godolphin, who is a member of a new generation, the one that has "lost the touch." He is a "ne'er-do-well" (V, 142), who "couldn't yet become serious over politics" (V, 143), and who "wanted to be left alone, never to 'do well' in his own way . . . would defend that oaf's integrity to the last lazy heartbeat" (V, 144). The past has turned into a tale, a yarn only an oldtimer--Good old Godolphin--can spin.

Good old Pym's tale then is just such another wonderful tale of virtù and of the experience of personal horror, irremediably lost to us. Pynchon thus comments in his reinterpretation both on the story and on the "story as tale." He exploits Poe's story, creating an analogous one with the very means Poe used, but at the same time he reveals Poe's story to be a romantic tale and a lost reality. He stresses the fictitiousness of the story, and thus goes beyond
mere use of Poe's story as a source. He incorporates it, together with another story by Poe, into a grander scheme that fits his specific needs. That Pynchon's new tale is in itself a small work of art, just as wonderful and fantastic as the original, speaks for Pynchon the writer, and maybe for the fact that the reality is lost, but not the fiction.

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Notes

1 Thomas Pynchon, V. (New York: Bantam Books, 1964). Quotations will be from this edition, which will be cited in parentheses in the text as V.

2 Edgar Allan Poe, "The Mask of the Red Death" in The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe (New York: Random House, 1938), 269-73. Quotations will be from this edition, which will be cited in parentheses in the text as M.

3 Edgar Allan Poe, The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975). Quotations will be from this edition, which will be cited in parentheses in the text as N.

4 Harold Beaver, "Introduction" to The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket, 11.


6 Jules Verne, Journey to the Centre of the Earth (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965). Verne's constant allusion to the leading scientists of his age is demonstrated, for instance, on page 9: "Humphry Davy, Humboldt, Captain Franklin, and General Sabine never failed to call on him when passing through Hamburg."


8 This notion of final truth at earth's core is closely related to Pynchon's concept of "rockhood,"
and to his investigation into the "inanimate." The laws "written into nature" correspond—in their function as explaining instances—closely to the messages "written" into Poe's stone maze. This "truth by laws of nature" and its inevitability is one of Pynchon's main background-metaphors.

This connects directly to the recurrent topos of the Underworld/Underground in V., which comes up, for example, in Chapter 5 (Profane's descent into the bowels of New York's sewer system), and Chapter 11 (the siege of Malta/Valletta).

E.g., "he shared with his fellow-citizen Karl Baedeker a basic distrust of the South" (V, 212). "... this southsickness [was] progressive and incurable" (V, 212-13).

Beaver, "Introduction," 11.

The nature of V. as an "open symbol" is responsible for this phenomenon. V.'s openness to all kinds of allusions and speculations structures the book around a "void," which, however, at the same time holds the book together—the main paradox of V.'s structure.


The relation of color and truth is taken up by Pynchon in his discussion of the "Venus" of Botticelli, which stands in a direct relation to the spider monkey. "'She is so beautiful!'" (V, 151), Mantissa says, but then, in the act of stealing her, of cutting her from the frame, "Cesare dug the knife into the canvas. ... Signor Mantissa watched its movement, a slow horror growing in him. In that instant he was reminded of Hugh Godolphin's spider-monkey, still shimmering through crystal ice at the bottom of the world. The whole surface of the painting now seemed to move, to be flooded with color and motion... What sort of mistress, then, would Venus be? ... And she ... was only ... A gaudy dream, a dream of annihilation" (V, 193). He leaves her. (And is it only a coincidence that the ebony clock in "The Mask" also hangs
"on the western wall" [M, 270]. The "Venus" in the Uffizi actually does. Pynchon's investigations are thorough.

The Rhetoric of Death
in The Crying of Lot 49
Marie-Claude Profit*

Translated by Margaret S. Langford

A sentence from Pynchon's novel will define the scope of this paper. It appears on page 116 of the Bantam edition.1 One of the characters, Professor Bortz, is projecting for the heroine some slides he took secretly in the Vatican library. They are slides of engravings illustrating the pornographic version of Wharfinger's play, The Courier's Tragedy.

We will come back to that imaginary tragedy and its imaginary author later. For the time being I will mention only the comments—in or rather only a few of the comments—Bortz makes as he shows the slides: "Notice how often the figure of Death hovers in the background."

What the quote underscores as characteristic is, first of all, an insistence: the multiplicity of references to a figurative theme (how often); secondly, it reveals the special way the theme appears: it appears in the background, discrete and yet persistent.

It seemed to me that above and beyond any immediate literal meaning it had in context, this statement about Death called our attention to the whole text. This is the hypothesis I will attempt to prove.

But first, perhaps it will be useful to summarize The Crying of Lot 49. Here is a first, provisional summary: one suggested by the given name of the character the story centers around.

She's a young woman. Her name is Oedipa Maas. Oedipa: the feminine form of Oedipus. The modern

* Originally published as "La Rhétorique de la mort dans The Crying of Lot 49," in Delta 8 (1979), 155-74. The editors are grateful to Claude Richard and the Centre d'Etude et de Recherches sur les Ecrivains du Sud aux Etats-Unis, Université Paul Valéry for permission to publish this translation.
American feminine counterpart of the Greek hero. At the same time a narrative agenda is stated: an investigation, the search for and discovery of a hidden truth. Moving from not knowing to knowing. Sophocles' drama is based on this model, which is the archetypal model for our detective novels and films—so it has often been said. An attempt is made in The Crying of Lot 49 to imitate the detective genre. In the novel, Oedipa (ironically) compares herself to the private detective in the old radio shows:

That optimistic baby had come on so like the private eye in any long-ago radio drama, believing all you needed was grit, resourcefulness, exemption from hidebound cops' rules, to solve any great mystery.

But the private eye sooner or later has to get beat up on. (91)

A mystery. Attempts made to solve it. The unveiling of truth. If necessary, we can find this pattern in the novel we are considering. Let us note, however, that Oedipa, unlike Oedipus or the traditional private detective, does not confront a clearly circumscribed problem stated in precise terms and having only one possible solution. Perhaps there isn't even a problem, or there isn't an answer, or there are many answers. . . . The narrator notes that the young woman doesn't know exactly what she's looking for and what she wants.

Thus, in the dialogue with the producer, Driblette, we read: "They seemed to know what she wanted, even if she didn't" (they: refers to the eyes of Driblette), and, "She didn't know what she was looking for, exactly" (54). In short: less a problem than an uneasy feeling: "'It just has me uneasy'" (53).

A string of disquieting coincidences. A diffuse enigma experienced intuitively rather than recognized and thought out.

A few lines to illustrate these remarks. Oedipa visits San Narciso, the imaginary California town where the action takes place, for the first time. Looking at the tangle of streets and houses, she is reminded of the printed circuit of a transistor.
radio: both images suggest the same possibilities of hidden meaning, of hieroglyphics to be deciphered.

... there were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate[...]; so in her first minute of San Narciso, a revelation also trembled just past the threshold of her understanding. (13)

We find the word revelation used explicitly just when she is about to have one. Thus, "As if (as she'd guessed that first minute in San Narciso) there were revelations in progress all around her" (28).

A revelation can be no more than a startling encounter with something unexpected. It can also be the eruption of a supernatural truth into consciousness. Our text often plays upon the hesitation between these two values. The paradox of revelation taken in the most literal sense of the word is that the subject, because of the extreme violence of that explosion of truth, forgets it, just as an epileptic forgets what happened during his attack and remembers only the warning signs. There are times when the heroine isn't at all sure she hasn't found and then lost what she was looking for in this manner: "the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night" (87; my emphasis).

To give the investigation a motive, the story provides the investigator with a variety of facts which she interprets as mysterious signals designed to interest her, to warn her.

There is a word (WASTE) and a design (a combination of a loop, a straight line, a triangle and a trapezoid) that Oedipa notices on the wall of the ladies' room in a bar and that she soon begins to find just about everywhere...

There are stamps and cancellation marks like those used by the official mail service except for a few anomalies—anomalies which show they are counterfeit: transposition of two letters, POTSAGE instead of POSTAGE.

Finally, a proper name TRYSTERO is slipped into the Elizabethan play I've already mentioned, the play
Oedipa goes to:

No hallowed skein of stars can ward, I trow,  
Who's once been set his tryst with Trystero.

The narrator comments:

Trystero. The word hung in the air as the  
act ended and all lights were for a moment  
cut; hung in the dark to puzzle Oedipa Maas. . .  
(52)

The function of the secondary actors is to help or  
hinder the investigation—in essence, to give or re-  
fuse to give information to the principal actor. Each  
one has the special competence which his function as  
helper or preventor requires. To understand the  
counterfeit stamps we need a very skilled philatelist:  
thus Genghis Cohen appears. To follow the fate of a  
seventeenth century tragedy through its various edi- 
tions we need a learned specialist: Our specialist  
will be Professor Bortz, author of a critical edition  
of Wharfinger's play, etc.

The information collected in the course of the in- 
vestigation seems to show that a private postal sys- 
tem exists in California and that it keeps in contact  
with one another those initiates who have agreed to  
not use the official system.

This clandestine system is supposedly several cen- 
turies old, and was created in Europe to oppose Thurn  
and Taxis—the family that in effect monopolized the  
postal service under the Holy Roman Empire. Supposed-  
ly their adversary was a man called Trystero: sup-  
pposedly he led a vicious, secret fight against them.  
His followers, his couriers, attacked and massacred  
the couriers of the rival system. The design that  
intrigues Oedipa—the circle, the triangle, the  
trapezoid—is supposed to be the symbol of the  
Trystero system—(a post horn with a mute). Trans- 
lation: the will to silence Thurn and Taxis, whose  
emblem was the post horn that we find on some of their  
stamps.

Tristero presumably had its own stamps, which initi- 
atcs could recognize by certain deliberate anomalies.
Presumably it had its own mailboxes resembling public trash cans. Their covers carry the misleading label WASTE, which should be read as W.A.S.T.E., initials, for those capable of understanding, standing for this motto: We Await Silent Tristero's Empire. (Here we perceive a thread in the labyrinth: the text submits to the rule of ambiguity.)

Here, then, is the hypothesis which invades Oedipa's mind; there are many pieces of substantiating evidence to confirm it.

Nevertheless the very abundance of this evidence makes it all suspect, just as the police are likely to suspect a perfect alibi.

These puzzle pieces that fit together perfectly: nothing says they could not be fitted together to form a different, equally satisfying pattern. Doubts arise; or rather the narrator raises them, or has his character begin to have them. From the beginning of Chapter 3, Oedipa is astonished by the extremely logical way the facts she has at her disposal fit together. "That's what would come to haunt her most, perhaps; the way it fitted, logically, together" (28).

Much later, someone conversing with her formulates a new hypothesis, which Oedipa rejects even though it has already occurred to her:

"But there's another angle too. [...] Has it ever occurred to you, Oedipa, that somebody's putting you on? That this is all a hoax. . . ."
(125-26)

Of course everything did fit into place to create a meaning. But perhaps it wasn't the only possible meaning: other signifieds could just as well be matched with the same signifiers.

The same facts can take on a different meaning depending on our perspective; like certain paintings (de Vasarely's for example) which change according to the spectator's position and his angle of vision.

(A second, more distrustful reading would find food for thought in the protagonist's words and deeds, moments of hesitation, sudden silences, moments when she is embarrassed or irritated.)
A disturbing thought: the entire system as it now exists might collapse. The character would stop being a subject. The character would become an object: no longer running the game but being run by it. Trapped by an immense put-on—and perhaps metaphysically trapped by fate disguised as freedom.

Two concurrent series thus fall into place depending on which of the two hypotheses we accept, when neither is guaranteed to be more plausible than the other. This isn't a case of a false trail being contrasted with a real one, but of carefully induced hesitation between two trails, each seeming to be as genuine as the other.

It is possible, at this point in the analysis, to be somewhat more precise in comparing Pynchon's novel to the genre to which it seems related.

The detective story forms a closed and therefore reassuring system, which convinces the reader with the certainty of its irrefutable deductions. By the last page there is nothing more to wait for, nothing more to learn.

To the contrary, The Crying of Lot 49 acts like a machine for producing uncertainty.

If we can accept this as the basic goal of the author, then clearly he forbids the story to end. (Just as in Pinet's Inquisitio.) The narrative ends, not the story. The word END marks the end of the text, not the end of uncertainty, ambivalence and doubt.²

The hypothesis about Trystero is therefore to be counterbalanced by the hypothesis that Oedipa has been the victim of a joke.

The author of this joke could have been one Pierce Inverarity. To make the joke complete I refer once more to a quotation already cited:

"Has it ever occurred to you, Oedipa, that somebody's putting you on? That this is all a hoax, maybe something Inverarity set up before he died?"

It had occurred to her. But like the thought that someday she would have to die, Oedipa had been steadfastly refusing to look at that possi-
bility directly, or in any but the most accidental of lights. (126)

Oedipa was—in the past—Pierce Inverarity's mistress. At the beginning of the story, and the start of the investigation, we find Inverarity's will—the enigmatic gesture of a living man who attempts to keep his hold on other people even after death.

This gesture sets the wheels in motion. From a letter Oedipa learns that, before he died, Pierce designated her as executrix for his will. Although she knows nothing about such matters, Oedipa leaves the city where she's living, her husband, Mucho, and sets off for San Narciso where we've seen what awaited her.

To make the Inverarity hypothesis plausible, three of the traits associated with the testator are stressed in particular:

a) The fantastic fortune the story credits him with (all of San Narciso belongs to him, factories, stores, theater, university, etc., and he has his finger in every pie);

b) His talent for mimicry and acting allow him to play many parts and hide his true personality in the bewildering crowd of characters he assumes;

c) The philosophy of a man of action, which can be summed up in a single formula: don't stop. "Keep it bouncing," he'd told her once, "that's all the secret, keep it bouncing." (134)

To sum it all up, Inverarity believes he has the power to orchestrate a huge posthumous hoax—this would satisfy both his dynamic character and his temperament.

If we accept this, then these revelations must have been set up in advance; these clues must have been cleverly laid so that Oedipa would enter an endless labyrinth. The actors she expects to help her would become willing or unknowing accomplices in the plot.

This hypothesis does not seem any less plausible to our character than the other. Or rather it leaves
her completely perplexed: "Who knew?" (136).

Pierce's death both starts up the investigation and puts obstacles in its path at the same time. The trail comes to a dead end: "... she could never again call back any image of the dead man to dress up, pose, talk to and make answer ..." (134).

Furthermore, as if an invisible hand were removing parts of the puzzle, some actors are eliminated. Here again, death plays a part. Death or whatever resembles it most: physiological debility (the old sailor, Mr. Thoth), madness (the psychiatrist Hilarius), drugs (Mucho is addicted to LSD: "So much of him already had dissipated" [108]).

The death of Driblette, the producer of The Courier's Tragedy, is especially important. He was the one who put Oedipa on the track of Trystero. She thinks he is the only one who could have led her to Trystero. But he committed suicide shortly after their one and only meeting. And his death adds to the list of other mysteries the mystery of an act whose motives the young woman tries vainly to understand.

I won't insist on the role death plays in the working out of a romantic plot based on doubt. That role is apparent enough. I will devote my attention now to following this theme as it threads its way through the very texture of the text:

1. The word itself, first. DEATH: hidden within a proper name: Mr. Thoth, probably an allusion to the German TOD; hidden behind the initials ACDC (translated as "Alameda County Death Cult" [90]); substituted for WASTE, placed beside a post horn.

Like WASTE, it can be treated as an acronym: D.E.A.T.H., initials that a bus passenger translated as this warning: "Don't Ever Antagonize the Horn" (90).

We should also point out, for those who like to discover words within other words, that all the letters in Death as well as in Trystero can be found in the title of Wharfinger's play, The Courier's Tragedy. I don't know whether this is intentional or not.
2. Traditional substitutes for the word, taken mostly from religious iconography.

- The spectre: "He must have known, writing the will, facing the spectre . . ." (134).

- The death's head, in the Spanish name of the secret association's founder: Hernando Joaquin de Tristero y Calavera (calavera = skull); also on the cover of the anthology of Revenge Tragedies (pages 55 and 65: "'There was a skull on the cover,' Dribblette said." Later, in the bookstore: "The skull on the cover watched them, through the dim light").

- The angel of death: "angels of death" (102), (in the plural, in lower case letters); "dark Angel" (134), "Angel of Death" (136), (in the singular, in upper case letters); "a descending angel" (138). Undoubtedly these variants deserve careful examination.3

Here I add an example showing the angel's presence/absence, its anonymous passage through a sentence: Oedipa is going to learn about Dribblette's death:

"Hadn't you heard?" They all looked at her. Death glided by, shadowless, among the empties on the grass. (114)

3. A dominant chromatic theme: black. It's the color Trystero's men wear, agile assassins with black capes and masks. These assassins dressed in black, who appear and reappear on several occasions in the story, always work at night: "He [. . .] fashioned a livery of black for his followers, black to symbolize the only thing that truly belonged to them in their exile: the night" (120).

We know that black and night (the poet's "massive night") are commonly associated with the idea of death and the rites of death. After Randolph Dribblette's funeral, Oedipa comes back to his grave that evening: "There was no moon, smog covered the stars, all black as a Trystero rider" (120-21).

Many details in the text call up these images—sometimes a bit furtively. A few examples:

- On the counterfeit stamps, to distinguish them from other stamps, there is an almost imperceptible
mark: a black feather (71), a tiny figure in deep black (94).

- In a group of pop singers we see a graceful girl in black jersey leotards (43). She's the one who brings Wharfinger's play, a celebration of violent death, to Oedipa's attention.

- In a San Francisco street at night: "When she looked up, a man, perhaps a man, in a black suit, was standing in a doorway half a block away, watching her" (86); panic stricken, Oedipa jumps on a passing bus.

- In the auction hall, where the collection of counterfeit stamps, lot 49, is going to be auctioned off: "The men inside the auction room wore black mohair and had pale, cruel faces" (137).

- In Vesperhaven House, an old folks' home, the very old Mr. Thoth dozes before his television set and confuses in his dreams the anarchists on the screen (dressed all in black) and the memory of his grandfather who was an "Indian killer," who fought false Indians recognizable by their black feathers--the feathers of the real ones were white (67).

- A black fly settles on the man's pate and resists the admonitions of the nurse armed with a spray can of "bug spray." But doubtless that fly is black only because we expect it to be black---(66).

4. In one case the relationship between black and death is concrete and technical as well as symbolic: it is an animal-type, organic black. It is produced, as we well know, by burning bones. In The Crying of Lot 49, it is produced by burning human bones.

For example, we find the bones from a company of G.I.'s who died from unknown causes in Italy and whose bodies were thrown into a lake. Later, their remains are recovered by a clever business man. They travel from continent to continent, from firm to firm, from warehouse to warehouse, and end up at the Beaconsfield cigarette company which uses animal charcoal in the production of anti-cancer filters.
In the Wharfinger tragedy which the narrator analyzes in a separate brief insert we find an analogous metonymic route. The wicked Duke Angelo, as he writes a letter, makes rather abstruse comments about the ink he uses. We understand later that they are allusions to the ink's origins: it is prepared from an animal charcoal which he has made for him by burning his victims' bones: "Later on their bones were fished up again and made into charcoal, and the charcoal into ink" (52).

5. Allusion, which the ancient treatises on rhetoric classed with the "figures of expression through reflexion," is not reserved by Pynchon for the character of Angelo exclusively: the narrator uses it frequently. Several of the preceding examples serve as allusions. Here is another: Oedipa goes to Professor Bortz' place (112) for the first time. She is met by a little girl who brings her up-to-date on the latest family happenings: her sister has just been thoroughly spanked. That wasn't enough, however, according to the little girl who states: "'If she was mine I'd drown her.'" The mother says: "'Never thought of doing it that way.'"

Amusing dialogue. I won't say decisively that this is all it is, or whether it is a dialogue that also expresses a deep-seated death wish. Let's say that death lurks in the background. I only note that this short scene comes just before news of Driblette's suicide (he drowns in the Pacific Ocean). In retrospect, this seems to be a warning--a disguised hint about what the text will come to mean later.

The information concerning Driblette's suicide also reminds us of, especially reminds us of, a remark attributed to the actor: "'If I were to dissolve in here, [] be washed down the drain into the Pacific . . .'" (56). Other pieces of information fall into the same category as this one: the (fictional) death of the characters in the film Oedipa watches on the television screen: the father, the son and the dog--the Saint Bernard!--drowned; the death of the G.I.'s drowned in an Italian lake; the artificial lake Inverarity creates with authentic skeletons at the bottom for amateur scuba divers ---
Thus we see series being created. Details from various parts of the text fit together—they announce themselves, get ready, take on meaning in relationship to one another, form a network of signifiers and unifiers.

The text that was distributed—the old sailor sequence—allows us to make similar observations. From this sequence I will first quote ten lines which seem to me characteristic of Pynchon’s writing:

What rich soils had he turned. [ . . . ] What voices overheard, flinders of luminescent gods glimpsed among the wallpaper’s stained foliage, candlestubs lit to rotate in the air over him, prefiguring the cigarette he or a friend must fall asleep someday smoking, thus to end among the flaming, secret salts held all those years by the insatiable stuffing of a mattress that could keep vestiges of every nightmare sweat, helpless overflowing bladder, viciously, tearfully consummated wet dream, like the memory bank to a computer of the lost? (93)

Here the metonymic drift of the discourse results in a double disjunction:

a) Spatial disjunction. A place imagined by one of the two actors (the old sailor’s room, the patterned wallpaper) stands in opposition to the place where they are at the moment (the stairway).

b) Temporal disjunction. An anticipation or premonition (prefiguring). An imaginary future (someday) in opposition to the present where the actors are.

Oedipa imagines what the old man’s death will be like, his disappearance in a fire caused by negligence: the cigarette smoked while going to sleep.

Comment: a descriptive detail at the beginning of the episode can now be seen as an allusion. The old man’s hands as he hides his face as he meets Oedipa are smoke colored. ("Both hands smoke-white, covered his face" [92].)

I now turn to the part of the sequence where the actors come into the old man’s room, a room no longer imagined, but perceived by Oedipa.
A brief descriptive statement—or rather an inventory—from which I quote this portion. "Another bulb, dead. The bed. The mattress, waiting" (94). It is clear that the terms used in this list take on their full meaning only when we refer to the segment previously cited. The adjective dead, commonly used to describe a burned out light bulb, is more than just a cliché here: it makes the reader think about the old man's death. Furthermore, the phonetic analogy between dead and bed, the juxtaposition of the two words in the statement, helps put them in the same perspective: here the bed is not so much the article of furniture we sleep in as the article of furniture we die in.

Where we ___ will die. The word mattress reinforces the allusion. In the scenario, the mattress acts as agent in the old man's destruction. It not only is a functional part of the setting but also has a role in the actantial system. It is already on stage, ready to play its part—waiting.

The old man's mattress with its stuffing permeated with the sweat and nightmares of a lifetime is compared to the "memory" of a computer, "like the memory bank to a computer of the lost." A little bit later, the same analogy is used again; the comparison is contracted into a remarkably condensed metaphor: "That stuffed memory" (94).

Other metaphors in that same sequence deserve our attention for a moment. But also it will be useful to determine how Pynchon or his characters interpret the word metaphor. I will cite several instances. On page 77, the inventor Nefastis is speaking to Oedipa, who has difficulty in following the explanations he gives about the notion of entropy and Maxwell's Demon:

"Entropy is a figure of speech[, . . .], a metaphor. It connects the world of thermodynamics to the world of information flow. [, . . .] The Demon makes the metaphor not only verbally graceful, but also objectively true." (77)

Two aspects, then, of metaphor: an ornament of speech and an ornament of truth.
An important word in Nefastis' remarks: "it connects." Many words belonging to the same lexical group appear frequently.

"I want to see if there's a connection. I'm curious." (54)
Oedipa might have made the next connection by herself. (68)
To hold them together. (80)
The dead man, like Maxwell's Demon, was the linking feature in a coincidence. (89)

Oedipa's investigation is an effort to find a link, a relationship among the pieces of information which come to her either in complete disorder or else linked by disturbing coincidences. "Now here was Oedipa, faced with a metaphor of God knew how many parts; more than two, anyway."(80). All this is on the story level, where the narrative act consists in the construction of a system of fascinatingly complex relationships.

The definition of metaphoric activity as Nefastis defines it: "It connects the world of --- to the world of ---," isn't applicable to the physical world alone. We can see in the old sailor sequence, to which I now return, how it applies to states which are either pathological or regarded as being pathological.

The character is afflicted with delirium tremens. The word delirium is a metaphor itself: it comes from the word delirare, to leave the furrow, the straight furrow that normal people plow so "righteously."
"DT's. Behind the initials was a metaphor [.] a trembling unfurrowing of the mind's plowshare" (95).

The crises the old sailor experiences allow him to enter inconceivably wonderful worlds:

She knew that the sailor had seen worlds no other man had seen[.] because DT's must give access to dt's of spectra beyond the known sun, music made purely of Antarctic loneliness and fright. (96)

Various interpretations of the words delirium tremens allow the narrator to represent by one meta-
phoric term the miracle, the paranoia and the dreams of sleep.

The utilization of scientific discourse in literary discourse is one of the most salient traits of Pynchon's novel. Along the way we have encountered examples of figures of analogy that I have cited, in which the comparative term is most often chosen from the physical sciences (particularly from data processing). Doubtless we could regard this as a way of rejuvenating, of up-dating the stock of comparisons available to literature at a given time. But there is also another possibility: an as yet unexplored relationship between man and the world. A world where man is less sure of his rights. Where he feels he is being watched by things made for him to watch: "Oedipa stood in the living room, stared at by the greenish dead eye of the TV tube" (1).

According to Pynchon's vision, the non-human is not always evaluated in reference to what is human. The relationship is reversed: human competency and performance are measured according to computer performance standards—human competency, and even divine competency.

Describing the mad trajectory of a can of hair spray in a bathroom, the narrator comments:

The can knew where it was going, she sensed, or something fast enough, God or a digital machine, might have computed in advance the complex web of its travel. (23)

As for human performance, I will refer to the adventure of an executive in the Yoyodyne company. When he loses his job, the only solution he can come up with is to kill himself. Just when he is about to do this, his wife and her lover come in. The lover observes:

"Nearly three weeks it takes him [. . .] to decide. You know how long it would've taken the IBM 7094? Twelve microseconds. No wonder you were replaced." (85)

(The IBM 7094 is already an obsolete model at the time. According to specialists, the models have been improved since.)
I will add to those examples already given some instances where the scientific metaphor is used to describe death.

a) The destruction of a mental universe: Oedipa is shocked when she thinks of all that will be obliterated when the old sailor's mattress burns up with him. So many things that belong to him, his hallucinations, will be lost without a trace. Then Oedipa remembers what Nefastis told her about massive destruction of information: "[..."that massive complex of information, destroyed over and over with each power stroke""(77).

b) The powerlessness of the living to communicate with the dead: Here again, a reminder of Nefastis. He is the inventor of a machine mentioned several times in the story. According to Nefastis, right in the center of the system sits a real Maxwell's Demon who can communicate with the human psyche and, when the machine is operating, he can transform information into movement and energy. Oedipa uses herself as a guinea pig, but all in vain.

For fifteen minutes more she tried; repeating, if you are there, whatever you are, show yourself to me, I need you, show yourself. But nothing happened. (79)

The episode can be compared to the episode where Oedipa, sitting on Driblette's grave, attempts an impossible dialogue. "If they got rid of you [...because they thought I no longer needed you. They were wrong. I needed you" (121). (The same word as in the other statement, and the same outcome):

Driblette, she called. The signal echoing down twisted miles of brain circuitry. Driblette!

But as with Maxwell's Demon, so now. Either she could not communicate, or he did not exist. (122)

c) The uncertainty of a mind trapped between symmetrical hypotheses: That is Oedipa's adventure. Here's a metaphoric expression of what she experiences:

For it was now like walking among matrices of a great digital computer, the zeros and ones
twinned above, hanging like balanced mobiles
right and left, ahead, thick, maybe endless.
(136)

The computer uses a binary system: 1 or 0. The
image evolves:

Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would
either be a transcendent meaning, or only the
earth. In the songs Miles, Dean, Serge and
Leonard sang was either some fraction of the
truth's numinous beauty (as Mucho now believed)
or only a power spectrum. Tremaine the Swastika
Salesman's reprieve from holocaust was either an
injustice, or the absence of a wind; the bones
of the GI's at the bottom of Lake Inverarity
were there either for a reason that mattered to
the world, or for skin divers and cigarette
smokers. Ones and zeroes. So did the couples
arrange themselves. At Vesperhaven House either
an accommodation reached, in some kind of dignity,
with the Angel of Death, or only death and the
daily, tedious preparations for it. Another
mode of meaning behind the obvious, or none.
Either Oedipa in the orbiting ecstasy of a true
paranoia, or a real Tristero. For there either
was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the
legacy America, or there was just America and
if there was just America then it seemed the
only way she could continue, and manage to be
at all relevant to it, was as an alien, unfur-
rowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia.
(136-37)

Three comments:
- This passage sums up the heroine's successive
experiences. (We have noted these episodes in passing.)
- In the telling of these experiences we find
several allusions to death. The death we await (Mr.
Thoth), that we give or receive (the G.I.'s), that we
use (Inverarity), that we avoid (Tremaine).
- The terms listed are divided into two series ar-
ticated around the same conjunction (either/or).
In fact the same alternative is repeated throughout
this accumulation of equivalents. In this passage it
is formulated precisely and abstractly: Another mode
of being behind the obvious, or none.
With this formula the book ends, not with an answer but with infinite questioning. And not only about America: about society, History and Man . . .

It would be an error to treat it as a secret message we could attempt to decipher. Its trick is to proceed by using allusions to lead the reader to believe there is a key, to offer him several and then take them away from him soon afterwards.

An example, in my opinion, of a procedure fairly characteristic of the modern novel, a procedure which Roland Barthes, who calls it "a deceptive treatment of meaning," defines in these terms:

What do we mean by a deceptive treatment of meaning? We mean that the writer goes about proliferating meanings without either filling them up or closing them off and that he uses language to place them in a world forever signifying but, in the end, never signified.5

Notes

1 All subsequent quotes appear in the Bantam edition.

2 Here we obviously depart from the position held by several critics who "stop" the story just after the tale ends with a mystic revelation. The decision would lie between a profane and a "sacred" (correct) reading of the text. For Mendelson, the parodied use of the word "Pentecost" in The Courier's Tragedy, as well as the enigmatic number "49" in the title which refers us to the final scene, are (along with others) signals that make the denouement possible: the Sunday the auction is to take place Oedipa has come to the brink of an intelligible revelation (fifty days after Easter the apostles receive the gift of tongues).

For Thomas Hill Schaub, that revelation could only be the one that Oedipa has always avoided "facing up to" (Lot 49, 126): the revelation concerning her own DEATH. Cf. Mendelson, "The Sacred, the Profane, and The Crying of Lot 49," in Individual and Community: Variations on a Theme in American Fiction, ed. Kenneth H. Baldwin and David K. Kirby (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1975), 182-222; Thomas Hill Schaub, "Open Letter
in Response to Edward Mendelson’s ‘The Sacred, the Profane, and The Crying of Lot 49,’ ” Boundary 2, 5 (1976), 93-101.

3 Pynchon (page 50) distinguishes between the literal and metaphoric meaning of the name and its esoteric meaning ("a new mode of expression[. . .] certain things, it is made clear, will not be spoken aloud"). The example of the angel illustrates his thesis:

   literal meaning: "the dark angel," "the Angel of Death" (opposition Death/death-power/absence).

   metaphorical meaning: "Passerine spread his arms in a gesture that seemed to belong to the priesthood of some remote culture; perhaps to a descending angel" (138).

4 One of the most interesting examples is the proper name THOTH, which we showed as being related to the German word TOD earlier. Another possible relationship: THOTH/THOT. The Egyptian god of hieroglyphic writing, who is also guide for the dead, associated with funeral rites.

In the text, the lay-out of the San Narciso streets and the lay-out of transistor circuits are compared to hieroglyphics (13 and 136). The ancient Egyptian’s Book of the Dead is mentioned (18) in the course of an associative listing of items ("printed circuit, gently curving streets, private access to the water, Book of the Dead . . .").

Pynchon's Herero

David Seed

The most thorough attempt to explain and translate Pynchon's use of Herero words in Gravity's Rainbow has been made in Appendix II of Douglas Fowler's A Reader's Guide to Gravity's Rainbow (1980), which is by no means complete and very patchy in its commentary. The following is an attempt to fill some of its gaps. Fowler and Edward Mendelson have rightly identified Pynchon's two linguistic sources as F. W. Kolbe's An English-Herero Dictionary with an Introduction to the Study of Herero and Bantu in General (Cape Town: J. C. Junta, 1883) and P. H. Brincker's Wörterbuch und Kurzgefasste Grammatik des Otji-Herero (Leipzig: C. G. Böttner, 1886). Brincker's dictionary was reprinted in 1964 by the Gregg Press (Ridgewood, NJ). Pynchon is characteristically scrupulous in his use of Herero and often provides enough contextual hints to make the meaning of particular words evident.

a) Common words and phrases

1. omuhona (GR 100, 101, etc.). Fowler 270 glosses this term correctly as "lord, master." Kolbe gives both these meanings (308, 318) but also "chief" (85) which adds a tribal dimension to Enzian's individual submission to Weissmann. As the V-2 becomes the Herero totem, Weissmann logically assumes the status of a substitute deity or chief.

2. ... mba rara m'eroto ondyoze ... mbe mu munine m'oruroto ayo u n'omuinyo (GR 152). Fowler makes no more than a gesture at translating this section. The first sentence is taken verbatim from Brincker 168, except that the third word appears me roto, where it is given as an example of ondjoze (i.e., "nightmare") in use. It means "I have dreamt a nightmare." The second sentence is taken verbatim from Kolbe 32 where it appears as an example of ayo (i.e., "as if") in use. Kolbe translates the sentence "I saw him in my dream as if he were alive," but this does not take into account munine which means "shine." The sense of the sentence would thus seem to be "he was shining
in my dream as if he were alive." Fowler 270 draws attention to the derivation of ondjoze (i.e., "phantom") from the motion of a spider. These two sentences appear in Section 18 of GR, which consists of fragments of visitations which the medium Carrol Ewentyr experiences. Although Pynchon mentions the Herero on the next page, which gives the reader a clue as to the language, part of the mystery of these two sentences is the fact that they are incomprehensible, like some of the other fragments. The actual meaning of the sentences ties them in very closely with the related themes of nightmare and visitation which run through Part I of GR. The first sentence is almost repeated by Enzian later, imitating Martin Luther King: "My people, I have had a vision ..." (GR 525).

3. eanda and oruzo (GR 316). Pynchon identifies these terms as signifying matrilineal and patrilineal descent respectively. Heinrich Vedder explains that these formed two familial groups within the Herero nation, eanda being organized according to maternal rights and oruzo according to paternal rights; he goes on to translate eanda as "origin" and oruzo as "derivation." Clearly the terms refer nostalgically to the tribal organization which the Herero have lost.

4. Otukungurua (GR 316, 318). Although Pynchon explains the grammatical construction of this noun, its meaning does not become evident until its second appearance. The Herero have adopted as their title the "Empty Ones," in order to articulate their proximity to tribal death. Kolbe 177 explains kungurua as "emptied out" and Pynchon carefully points out that the prefix otu- denotes the inanimate and rising, as distinct from the animate prefix oma-. The exact meaning of Otukungurua would thus be "the emptied vessels" which would capture Pynchon's sense of spiritual deprivation.

5. outase (GR 325). Pynchon glosses this as "a large, newly laid cow turd," Brincker 229 as "frischer, welcher Kuhmist," and Kolbe 170 as dung "of large cattle, if fresh."

6. okanumaihi (GR 328). Pynchon echoes Kolbe's definition as "the little sweet milk drinker" (187).
Brincker 113 explains that the word means "Venus als Abendstern, gleich nach Sonnenuntergang, wenn die Kinder die frisch gemolkene Milch trinken, daher der Milchtrinker genannt." [Venus as the Eveningstar. The Children drink the freshly milked milk; therefore, (Venus) is also called the Milk-drinker.] This is another nostalgic reference to the culture which the Herero have lost. The star's name harks back to the time before the German conquest when the tribe still possessed cattle. The name of the star is all the more poignant a memory since, as Enzian recognizes, the star he is seeing from Germany, i.e., from the northern hemisphere, would be a different one anyway. Brincker 113 gives this word as oka-nu'omaihi and Kolbe 187 as oka-nu(a)-maihi.

7. mba - kayere (GR 362, etc.). Kolbe 361 gives this word as mba-kaere, but with the meaning Pynchon supplies, i.e., "I am passed over." As a mantra this represents an attempt by the Herero to salvage some spiritual consolation from their victimization by history.

8. m'okamanga (GR 456). Kolbe 279 gives mokamanga as meaning "instantly" or "instantaneously." Pynchon in fact gives us a gloss by commenting "there is urgency and gravity in the word." Probably the sense of this radio transmission would be "come in."

9. orururumo orunene; omunene (GR 520). These terms mark a further step in the sacralization of the rocket by the Herero. Pynchon now takes his words from the grammatical section of Kolbe's book. Orururumo means "a flame" and orunene "great" or "big." Omunene is the animate form of the latter adjective, the prefix omu- contrasting with its inanimate equivalent oru- (Kolbe xxxi). Now the Herero are reversing the process of word-formation which Pynchon indicated on GR 316. Then they were erasing their own vitality; now they are projecting life on to their adopted totem, the rocket. Pynchon's gloss on these words comes almost verbatim from Kolbe who translates ru-, rurumo and nene as "the high, rising dead one," "blazing" and "large" respectively (xxxii). Pynchon here develops the attributes of the rocket yet further, retaining the paradox that, although the Herero attribute to it some kind of spiritual life, it remains nevertheless
a dead object which only mimics ascension. The Herero words occur at a crucial point for Enzian, when he sees a bombed-out oil refinery, possibly in perfect working order of a sort, and now begins to suspect that the rocket is only one particular manifestation of a larger technical process at work.

10. *iya 'kurandyé* (GR 673). *Iya* is probably a form of *ia/ya*, i.e., "we are going" (Kolbe 235). *'Kurandyé* does not mean "my brother" (Fowler 272), but "my fellow" or "my mate" (the apostrophe signifying a vocative form). Kolbe 203 gives as an example the phrase *indyo, 'kurandyé*, i.e., "come, my fellow."

b) Herero names

1. **Ekori (GR 730) = "cap" (Fowler 272; Brincker 12; Kolbe 75).**

2. **Khama (GR 323).** King of the Bechuanas who sent help to the Herero on their trek across the Kalahari. Pynchon's source for this detail is W. P. Steenkamp's *Is the South-West-African Herero Committing Race Suicide?* (Cape Town, c. 1935), 12-13. Khama and Samuel Maherero are the only historical native names Pynchon uses.

3. **Maherero, Samuel (GR 323).** The Herero chief who led his people across the Kalahari into exile in Bechuanaland, where he died in 1923 (v. "Mondaugen's Story" in V.).

4. **Nguarororerue (GR 314-16, 320, 362-63, 673, 730, 732).** Pynchon explains the name, or more properly the title, as meaning "one who has been proven" (GR 316). Kolbe 515 gives the root of this word *roro* as meaning "try" or "test." *Ngua-* is the pronominal prefix "who," and *-erue* is an adjectival suffix. Hence, as Pynchon states, "one who has been tested." The title grows out of a mock-parable (probably mimicking Buber's *Tales of the Hassidim*) and is applied to Enzian in his capacity as a tested leader. Fowler 270 rightly points to Enzian's Moses-like role, of course ironic because any Judaeo-Christian analogue would be alien to true Herero culture. This paradox emerges grotesquely in the last use of Enzian's title in the novel as "Oberst Nguarororerue."
5. **Okandio** (GR 730, 732) = "little bell" (Fowler 272; Brincker 112; Kolbe 51).

6. **Ombindi**, Joseph (GR 319-21, 328, 519, 523-25, 673, 732-33). From the Herero word ombinda, i.e., "pig" (Fowler 271; Brincker 130; Kolbe 369). One of the Herero leaders and a close associate of Enzian's; he preaches the return to an innocence he has only heard of. Cf. entry for Ovatjimba.

7. **Omużire** (GR 730-31) = "shadow" (Fowler 272; Brincker 160; Kolbe 439). A glance at the attenuated identity of the Herero.

8. **Onguruve** (GR 327-28) = "wild pig" (Fowler 271; Kolbe 369).

9. **Orukambe**, Andreas (GR 325, 327-28, 362, 455-56, 518-19, 562-63, 657-58, 730-31) = "hartebeest" (Brincker 186; Kolbe 249), a kind of antelope. Another of the Herero leaders whose name symbolizes the tribal split between two cultures.

10. **Orutyene** (GR 732) = "steep" (Brincker 193; Kolbe 471).

11. **Otyikondo** (GR 316) = "bastard" or "mulatto" (Fowler 271; Brincker 204; Kolbe 44). Enzian's derogatory tribal title. His racial mixture parallels Andreas Orukambe's hybrid name and underlines the Herero's irreversible loss of tribal unity.

12. **Otyiyumbu**, Jan (GR 638, 700) = "firebrand" (Brincker 202; Kolbe 209). Apart from the relevance of his name to his actions as an "herb-smoker" in the novel, Pynchon may also be glancing at the fragmentation of the Herero's tribal fire, which was sacred to their ancestors.

13. **Oururu** (GR 732) = "bitterness" (Brincker 228; Kolbe 57). Perhaps chosen for the name's similarity in sound to orururumo (GR 520). Kolbe defines the oru-class of nouns as including "inanimate, solid things, but chiefly such as rise or climb up" (xxix).

14. **Ovatjimba** (GR 315, 323, 403). Pynchon draws on Heinrich Vedder for his explanation of this name, which denotes the poorer members of the Herero tribe, i.e., those below the cattle-owners in status. According to Vedder, these people got the name of tjimbas from living off what they could grub out of the earth.
("ant-bears"). Pynchon (GR 315) develops this legend by suggesting that the people took as their collective symbol the aardvark, in German the Erd-Schwein, and hence the Zone Herero are mimicking their tribal animal by living in holes in the ground. This linkage is both verbally precise and also broadens out into the general significance of the pig as victim in GR (cf. Slothrop's Plechazunga role). Ombindi and Onguruve thus have particularly significant names.

15. Ozohande (GR 732). A facetious Herero nickname for a wireless operator. Ozo- is a plural prefix, and ohande = "spark" (Kolbe 461). Hence "Sparks."

c) Sacred names

1. Ndjambi Karunga (GR 100, 322, 323). Pynchon identifies this within context as the name of the Herero God, first invoked in the novel by Weissmann's Herero catamite, Enzian. Vedder comments that "his name is invoked only in thanksgiving after some unexpected luck; or they [the Herero] pray to him when all other means of help fail." The use of this name is heavily ironic because the essence of Ndjambi is kindness, whereas the boy is in fact stimulating his own sexual submission. Ndjambi is also important here and elsewhere in the novel as a sacred name which still carries traces of its original magical power.

2. Mukuru (GR 322, 524, 562). Vedder translates this term as "the old one" and explains that it signifies the primal ancestor of the Herero, the first man to emerge from the tree of creation (see following entry) with his wife Kamungarunga. Another Herero name for God. Early in GR Pynchon mentions the Herero's communication with their ancestors. The repeated phrase "the breath of Mukuru" (GR 524) seems to carry connotations of threat and death. On GR 562 Mukuru is referred to as a guide, leading the Herero on in their search for the rocket 00000.

3. Omumborombanga (GR 321). This term appears within an associational sequence of Enzian's thoughts which drift back to his lost tribal pieties. According to Herero myth, man originated out of the omumborombanga tree, which is accordingly venerated for symbolizing the tribe's sacred descent. In GR this tree merges into the cabballistic Tree of Life (v. GR 747-48).
In the Central Asian section of GR Pynchon uses a strategic number of local terms in order to evoke an ethos or culture. With the Herero this is impossible, since they are in permanent exile. Accordingly the Herero names, by referring to creatures and objects of the South-West, underpin the nostalgia of the Schwarzkommando for their lost land and lost tribal pieties. Any invocations of Mukuru, for instance, seem absurdly anachronistic and only demonstrate how the Herero have fallen between their native culture and an incompletely assimilated Christian culture. Pynchon's use of intermittent Herero vocabulary also underlines this irony. The Herero are in a linguistic position similar to that of the Maltese in V., in the sense that their native language has been smothered by a superimposed colonial tongue—German. Their situation is doubly ironic since their colonizers are themselves under occupation; hence the pressure to speak a second alien language—English. The recurrence of Herero terms thus reminds the reader that Enzian and his followers are the ultimate Displaced Persons of the Zone.

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Notes


2 There is also an undated English edition of Kolbe published by Trübner & Co. of London.

3 I am grateful to Khachig Tölölyan and Clay Leighton's *An Index to Gravity's Rainbow* for help in locating page references, which are from the Viking edition, New York, 1973.

4 Brincker transliterates Herero into German phonetic script, Kolbe into English, with the result that their spelling varies in some cases. Pynchon usually uses the English transliteration.

5 Heinrich Vedder, "The Herero," in *The Native Tribes of South West Africa* (Cape Town: Cape Times, 1928), 185-86.

7 Vedder, "The Herero," 164.

8 Ibid., 165.

9 Ibid.
"Surely there are no American writers greater than these," pronounced a Syrian man teaching at King Saud University to an American woman, as both were attempting to revise the university's scanty offerings in American literature. The two writers were F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. The male professor's view prevailed. The opinion that there were no greater writers than these venerable ones—each of whom wrote his best work over fifty years ago—was easily transmuted into the "fact" that there were simply no other American writers at all worth considering.

This is unfortunate. It is my impression that Saudi Arabians, especially students, are eager for knowledge of the United States. The America they know is an easily accessible material one: disco tapes, big cars, high technological gadgetry. What is not so accessible is the meaning and value of these things. Such questions about them are as inevitable as their use, and to ask such questions is to have to turn to the society from which they emerged.

Where can that society best be known? I want to suggest that it provides the best account of itself in its literature, especially its fiction, always the most social of literary forms. There, for example, a student might be surprised to learn that the common criticism of Americans as "too materialistic" is actually both a commonplace among them and a statement of the deeper conviction that they are not materialistic enough. America is a nation founded upon a religious idea of itself, and it has felt inadequate to this idea since its origins. Hence, the recurrent notion of the "American dream," which in more recent writing becomes increasingly a nightmare. To be tempted by the dream—as who is not who uses its material products?—without knowing that it contains within itself its own nightmare is actually equivalent to giving up the consciousness that the dream inspires. American fiction of the last fifty years is that consciousness. It is both a wide-ranging criticism
of American values and, never more than when it is a criticism, a distinctively American representation of those values.

How widely known is it that many Americans (part of whose "idea" of America was that it would be nature perfected, a new Eden) are deeply suspicious, even contemptuous, of the very technology for which they are famous to the rest of the world? America is not, or not merely, technology, or violence, or conspiracies, or innocence. It is furthermore the imaginative presentation of these themes, which constitute nothing less than Americans' own awareness about themselves. If Saudis want to be informed about America, they need to share this awareness. If Saudis are rightly concerned about the effects of American products on their own values, they need to do more than consider ways of marketing things and making sure the markets which sell them are closed during prayers.

Where to begin? It is my impression that there continues to be an utter void. During nearly a year of living in Saudi Arabia, virtually every discussion I have had about the United States with any Saudi has eventually turned into an objection on my part to the formula whereby "America" is converted into "New York," which, in turn, is made to equal "violence" and/or "moral decay." I would like to have appealed to a mutual knowledge of Saul Bellow's Mr. Sammler's Planet, a novel which is, in part, a contemplation of this same formula. But the fiction of America's only living Nobel Prize-winner seems to be as unknown as the fact that millions of Americans live in small towns, where there is so little violence that any (such as the robbery in my own nearly a decade ago) is likely to be the occasion of as much disbelief as excitement.

So I mention this example, but it is too futile, too hopelessly personal to counter years of films and journalistic accounts—of an entire discourse of conventions about Americans which is, in its way, as spurious and insidious as that which obtains about Arabs in America. The conventions of this discourse don't include the acknowledgment that there is by now a considerable body of American fiction about small towns—themselves an enduring source of nostalgia and
fantasy even for millions more of urban Americans who will never experience their rhythms and their rituals. To how many Saudis would a reading of, for example, John Updike's *Of the Farm* come as a shock? It is a short, lyrical novel rich with the surfaces of family harmony and domestic fulfillment—values likely to be those of any Arab reader, and therefore an occasion for real cultural contact.

It needs to be emphasized that there are genuine points of contact. They do not even have to be carefully considered. Professorial pronouncements about who is "great" and who is not are of little help to either society. They are "academic" in the worst sense and remain in the institutional stomach like an undigested meal. At King Saud University students of literature themselves (who have, after all, the best possible opportunity for concentrated study) are limited to only one course in the whole subject of American literature—and then only a novel by either Mark Twain or Nathaniel Hawthorne; never mind Fitzgerald or Hemingway.

So where to begin? I want to suggest that a student (but now in the broadest sense of this term) begin with recent American fiction, because he is most immediately engaged there by just those dimensions of American life which lure him in the first place. Beginnings, as Edward Said (a Palestinian who is one of the foremost literary theorists in the United States) has recently argued, are always arbitrary. The important thing is always to begin—and to trust that the beginning will bear fruit. I don't believe that it will ever be easy for a Saudi to read American fiction. (I recall the frustrations of a former colleague of mine teaching *Catcher in the Rye*, a novel whose lonely voice, callow cynicism about social life, and quirky humor most American adolescents soak up as effortlessly as the rays of the sun.) I would only argue that it is necessary, or as necessary as the Kingdom deems its own participation in all things American.

It will not be, nor is it already, only an affair of corn flakes, Buicks, hamburgers, and calculators. One of the things American fiction of recent years is especially about is plots which get out of hand, pat-
terns which have larger structures than anyone can foresee, conspiracies which extend into all areas of life even as their very existence is only dimly realized.

II

The American writer who for me best represents these latter themes is Thomas Pynchon. He is still a moderately young man (born in 1937), and his work (aside from a few short stories) consists only of three novels: *V.* (1963), *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). As far as I know there are no translations of any of these novels into Arabic, a fact not especially noteworthy but for the notices in a recent issue of a magazine established a few years ago for the study of his work that a collection of essays by German scholars has just been published and that portions of Pynchon's fiction have already been translated into Japanese. With Pynchon, American fiction has perhaps its most fully international author of the century. (The novels are variously set in Egypt, Africa, Italy, Germany and England, as well as the United States.) His first novel was hailed by one critic as the greatest first novel in literary history. His last was judged by another to be the greatest in English in forty years.

These texts are extraordinarily demanding. It is no accident that they have attracted a critical commentary which has already reached some dozen books. (It is also no accident that the King Saud library has two of them, though none of the fiction.) Like so many other contemporary writers from any country, the way Pynchon eludes, and yet entices interpretation is the very basis for his being read in the first place. He will never be a popular writer. Even those of my readers here who read English very well will find him unintelligible in many places. What I want to consider briefly is why I nevertheless commend him to an audience which will not be able to read him, even in translation, for some years.

This is a state of affairs, for one thing, which Pynchon himself is likely to regard with some amusement. The man himself is distinguished by his absence. There have been no publicly available pictures of him since that in his college yearbook; a comedian appeared
in his place to accept the National Book Award for *Gravity's Rainbow* in 1974; Pynchon has no known address, and he has instructed his publishers to refuse to answer any personal inquiries about him. There is only the work, which is, paradoxically, the more seductive because it proceeds from a single authorial source that remains secret, unknown, and hermetic. (One inevitably thinks of such an author as Norman Mailer—whose very effort to write a book is the subject of magazine articles and who once ran for mayor of New York—as an utter contrast in this regard.) There is, one must assume, an inside to Pynchon's texts which never gets outside. Whatever their autobiographical roots, his novels are not about the experience of being Thomas Pynchon. (To cite another counter-example of a comparable American, the fiction of Philip Roth is almost exclusively concerned with the experience of being Philip Roth.) There is experience in Pynchon which has no use for words, there is consolation in the knowledge that he will never be read by millions, and there is already suspicion enough of the thousands.

What follows is that his writing incorporates these millions—anonymous victims of history, bums, children, aliens of various sorts—into its seething energies. They come to constitute a vast, diffuse US either excluded or denied by the oppressive, imperial power of *THEM*. Between these poles the force of Pynchon's writing moves. There is no theme in recent American fiction—the lure of apocalypse, the exhaustion of idealism, the power of other versions of experience (literary, filmic, oneiric)—which he does not display. But in comparison with Pynchon's, most other contemporary American writing seems provincial: the tribulations of frail egos yearning for either release from or reattachment to the latest change of fashion or style of personal consumption. Pynchon's is not finally a fiction of the inner world but of the outer. It is not so much a "product" of America as a recognition that "America" may be the name for a process of modernization, technological change, and economic expansion which is already one definition for the entire world. Therefore, it is a fiction of things, of people rendered as things, of people who cannot understand one another unless translated into more compre-
hensive frameworks, within which they can be understood, nevertheless, as common objects of historical reification.

These are daunting matters. It is difficult to suggest something not only of Pynchon's explanatory power, but also of his astonishing range: sometimes savage, sometimes tender, always abundant. It is also difficult to suggest anything of how the fiction is haunted by the sense that (as his last, massive novel puts it) the "real Text" is located somewhere else. Perhaps it will be sufficient to mention to readers who will never read him that one measure of Pynchon's authority for those who do is that he takes account of the status of his work in the world. The novels are saturated by the sense of their own incompleteness. Pynchon writes with the active, shaping knowledge that his words are dispensable, that at best they merely add to the world's stories about itself or otherwise accumulate as yet more "versions" of experience which will never be inclusive enough.

Yet if the "real Text" persists somewhere else, there are nevertheless these texts, Pynchon's own, which already exist. They proceed from a source which is unyieldingly, voraciously American without being limited to that source. I write of his fiction as what I take it to be: a presence in the world. It is not a fact. And yet the fiction constitutes precisely what the American critic R. P. Blackmur meant when he wrote that poetry "adds to the stock of available reality."

What is the function in one culture of a major writer from another? If the writer is Pynchon and the other culture is Saudi Arabia, the answer is easy: none. But Pynchon is the only major recent American writer who can tell us why, and how his absence is a kind of presence nonetheless. The matter does not finally have to do with translation. It has to do with the political conditions of readership.

We are all of us bound together at a deeper level than politics and, it may be, even culture. There are at least texts already written in which each of us, Saudis and Americans, exists. We don't always get to see who wrote them, and we can't read them all. One
of the major concerns of recent American fiction—and Pynchon's most urgently—is of routes not taken: personal, cultural, historical. Sometimes all that can be done is to indicate a recognition lost, or a sequence no longer possible to reproduce, or an illumination only barely perceptible on the edge of sense. I have tried to write of recent American fiction in precisely this sense. It is one route to more fundamental affinities. If not yet "available" in the Kingdom, it still abides elsewhere—like a quiet street in Chicago, the fast lane in the supermarket, the latest idiom in Los Angeles, powdered snow in Pennsylvania, a vulgar burst of energy, industrial waste almost anywhere, and local shocks of hitherto alien truths everywhere.

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Note

1 Editors' Note: Terry Caesar wrote this essay during the spring of 1982, while he taught in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, as a Fulbright scholar. It was translated into Arabic and published in Risalat-ul-Jami'ah ("The University Letter"), a weekly publication of Riyadh's King Saud University. By a coincidence we do not believe in for a moment, the issue was that of 8 May 1982; that is the thirty-seventh anniversary of V-E Day—and Pynchon's forty-fifth birthday. Prof. Caesar was asked to write "anything on American literature. You know, what authors to read, John Updike, anything." We recently published Vincent Balitas's piece on Weber and Pynchon, which first saw the light of day in Iran. This essay, we believe, is a version of the first extensive piece on Pynchon to be published in Arabic. It may be worthwhile to recall that Saudi Arabia is a country born partly out of a religious conception of itself, and that its current social crisis is brought on, in large part, by the flood of technology and consumer goods it has imported. That crisis often takes the form of a fear of moral decay imported, like technology, from the West.
Tangled Hierarchies:
Gödel, Escher, Bach and Gravity's Rainbow
(An Abstract of Work in Progress)

Elizabeth Bayerl

Douglas Hofstadter tells us in Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid (1979) that the rapid development of computer technology in the past two decades has brought about a new kind of perspective on just what thought is—its powers and weaknesses, as well as its idiosyncracies. This has been made possible through computer experimentation with what he calls "alien, yet hand-tailored forms of thought—or approximations of thought." The results of this experimentation are reflected in the theory and designs developed in the artificial intelligence (AI) field, and many of these developments are considered at some length in Gödel, Escher, Bach.

The key assumption of artificial intelligence is that symbolic processes of mind are explainable in their own terms, without direct reference to neural events in the brain, though such activity is closely tied to these events. In computer terminology, symbolic processes thus are referred to as "software" and neural events as "hardware." This assumption enables artificial intelligence researchers to proceed on the premise that intelligence, or information processing like human intelligence, can be realized in other types of hardware than brains.

Working from this premise, Hofstadter has extended a process from computer programming to define a kind of thought pattern he believes to exist at the core of human consciousness, called the "strange loop." The general idea of loops in computer programming is the performance of a series of related steps over and over automatically, terminating the process as soon as the specific conditions of the program are met. Recursive looping, a process Hofstadter pays particular attention to, occurs when the looping is happening on several levels at once, but the series of loops are somehow nested within each other. However, since recursion is the notion of something that is defined in simpler versions of itself (such as the frame story in
fiction), the events taking place on each level are not exactly the same in that the levels are not identical.

Hofstadter states that a sufficiently complicated recursive loop in a computer can be a procedure leading to unpredictable results. Subtly complicated recursive systems might be strong enough to break out of predetermined patterns. AI researchers hope to invent programs that not only "call" themselves up, but modify themselves and act upon other programs, extending, improving, and generalizing them. This Hofstadter believes is the kind of tangled recursiveness that lies at the heart of human intelligence. The assumption is, of course, that the human mind is a multilevel system, formalized in the neural behavior of the brain.

Hofstadter writes that the "strange loop," or tangled hierarchy, occurs whenever one moves upwards (or downwards) through the distinct, though related levels of a system, only to find oneself suddenly back at the point of origin. The loop is considered "strange" or "tangled" because it implies a violation of distinctions between levels. Much of Gödel, Escher, Bach is given to tracing such a looping pattern in various areas, from aesthetic patterns to the recombination of genes and the paths of elementary particles.

Hofstadter focuses on J. S. Bach's canons, M. C. Escher's prints, and K. Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem to define and illustrate the essence of this pattern. Bach's canons and fugues feature independent voices playing a central theme against itself, transforming a theme that is fully recoverable in the voices. The "Canon per Tonos," renamed by Hofstadter as the "Endlessly Rising Canon," is a three-voice work that modulates upwards six times until the original key is restored, an octave higher, at the end of the piece. The rising, varied tonalities caused by successive modulations suggest the movement of a spiraling loop that eventually returns to the point of origin. Hofstadter finds the most exemplary visual illustrations of his concept in Escher's prints. Escher's "Waterfall" (1961) lithograph, for instance, renders a multilevel structure in which water is channeled through its
discrete levels in a physically impossible manner. Water splashes down on a water wheel at the point where the water is depicted to begin its zigzagging flow between the two towers of the structure.

Most directly related to Hofstadter's argument as a whole is his analysis of Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem as a strange loop in number theory. Hofstadter gives us a paraphrase of the well-known theorem: "All consistent axiomatic formulations of number theory include undecidable propositions." An undecidable proposition within a formulation is one which that formulation is capable of neither proving nor disproving. What is particularly significant about the theorem, for Hofstadter's purposes, is the proof. Gödel created a code, called Gödel-numbering, which represents numbers by symbols and symbol-sequences, using mathematical reasoning to explore mathematical reasoning. The genius of the proof hinges on the writing of a virtually self-referential mathematical statement, that is, a statement about numbers that in effect talks about itself. As Hofstadter writes, "explanation hinges on understanding not just one level at a time, but the way in which one level mirrors its metalevel, and the consequences of this mirroring."

The idea of a system referring to itself (self-reference) underscores the deepest elements of Hofstadter's metaphor of strange loops. He suggests that language creates strange loops, for instance, when it talks about itself, whether directly or indirectly. Something in the system jumps out and works on the system, as if it were outside the system. Hofstadter ultimately applies his theory to the most complex of symbolic events, the human mind. He believes that what he terms "emergent properties" of our mind/brains--ideas, hopes, images, analogies, consciousness--are based on a kind of strange loop. The functioning of the mind/brain consists of an interaction between levels. The top level reaches down toward the bottom level and influences it, while at the same time being itself determined by the bottom level. The mind has the power to reflect itself; hence, it is a self-referential system. Self-understanding, however, is limited because of the tangledness of the loop. As Hofstadter has written, "We can
come close to seeing and understanding ourselves objectively, but each of us is trapped inside a powerful system with a unique point of view—and that power is also a guarantor of limitedness." This vulnerability, of "self-hook," as Hofstadter terms it, might be the source of the sense of self.

The theoretical framework proposed in Gödel, Escher, Bach clarifies the structure and meaning of Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow (1973). Of major importance linking the two works is the fact that Hofstadter experimented with ways in which the very subject of his text could be made to mirror the metaphor which defines his theme, his thesis. He employs devices commonly used in characterizing canons and fugues as musical forms to interweave independent strains of thought that serve to define and extend the notion of strange loops. Inventing fictive conversations between various personae who argue the issues raised elsewhere in the book, Hofstadter alternates these dialogues with the chapters in which the thesis is explicitly developed. Most of the dialogues are in turn patterned after specific works by Bach, and the book's thematic concerns emerge out of the interplay of ideas between the imaginary speakers of these conversations. Contrapuntal movement thus not only characterizes the structure of the dialogues, but also provides the basis for alternating these allegorical conversations with those sections which Hofstadter devotes to exegesis. Moreover, Hofstadter deliberately inserts into the final dialogue a discussion that refers (or loops) the reader back to the beginning of the book. In this fashion, Gödel, Escher, Bach parallels the method and aim of Gravity's Rainbow.

A number of affinities with the rendering of Gravity's Rainbow suggest themselves: experimentation with multiple levels of mind and thought and diverse genres of narrative; coding as a fundamental property of intelligence and belief; and the incompleteness principle as a radical and formal property of knowledge. Of greatest significance, however, is that Pynchon in Gravity's Rainbow can also be shown to employ the strange loop in its various manifestations as a means of demonstrating the characteristics of thought signified by that metaphor.

Syracuse University
Pynchon on Record

Steven Moore

Given Pynchon's penchant for popular music, it is appropriate that his \textit{V.} inspired at least two musical compositions in the sixties. The earlier is an instrumental entitled simply "V." by Pynchon's Cornell friend Richard Fariña; it first appeared on \textit{Celebrations for a Grey Day} (Vanguard), which \textit{The New York Times}' Robert Shelton chose as one of the ten best folk records of 1965. The song also appears on \textit{The Best of Mini and Richard Fariña} (1971), a two-record anthology also on Vanguard; both albums are still available. "V." is played on dulcimer with tambourine accompaniment by Bruce Langhorne; the droning dulcimer has a Near Eastern flavor and consequently seems to have been inspired by the Alexandria of \textit{V.}'s third chapter. In his liner notes to \textit{Celebrations for a Grey Day} Fariña described his composition thus:

\begin{quote}
Call it an East-West dreamsong in the Underground Mode for Tom Pynchon and Benny Profane. The literary listener will no doubt find clues to the geographical coordinates of Vheissu, the maternal antecedents of the younger Stencil, and a three-dimensional counter-part of Botticelli's Venus on the half shell. May they hang again on a western wall.
\end{quote}

"Esther's Nose Job" is the title of a jazz-rock suite by the avant-garde British group Soft Machine (named after Burrough's novel), and first appeared on \textit{Soft Machine: Volume Two} (Probe) in 1969. (For some reason only the American issue gives the suite title; the British simply lists the individual songs.) Written by the group's keyboard player, Mike Ratledge (an honors student at Oxford before he joined the band), the suite is divided into five parts: only the second part, entitled "Pig" (after Bodine?), contains lyrics, most of which are undecipherable, except for singer Robert Wyatt's recurring lament for "all the time wasted,/Time we could have spent completely nude,/Bare naked." The suite is a thrilling composition but
does not seem to owe anything to Pynchon's novel other than its title. An arrangement (sans lyrics) was made for a larger jazz ensemble for a BBC broadcast on 29 November 1969, and this arrangement can be found on Triple Echo, a three-record anthology released in England only in 1977, on the Harvest label. Unfortunately, neither album is still available, though copies can usually be found in used record stores.

It might also be worth noting here, with reference to Gravity's Rainbow, that there was indeed a rock group called The Fool. It put out one record in the late sixties, but beyond that it doesn't fit the description of the group with which Slothrop eventually plays (GR, Viking, 742), in part because the real Fool (whose album jacket is covered with Tarot imagery) consisted of only four members—two men and two women—and are not posed "in the arrogant style of the early Stones, near an old rocket-bomb site" (742). There is, however, an unidentified harmonica player on the album. Hmm.

Denver, Colorado
From Cabals to Post-Structural Kabbalah

Joseph W. Slade


The justly famous "Caries and Cabals" chapter of Tony Tanner's City of Words: American Fiction, 1950-1970 (Harper & Row, 1971) championed Thomas Pynchon as a major writer when many critics had not yet gotten around to reading V., let alone The Crying of Lot 49. Tanner followed this astute discussion of Pynchon's first two novels with a less perceptive but still valuable review of Gravity's Rainbow in London Magazine (1974). Both chapter and review were reprinted together as "V. and V-2" in Edward Mendelson's collection of essays on Pynchon (Prentice-Hall, 1978). As nearly as I can tell, Tanner has reworked and expanded those earlier pieces, added a standard interpretation of Pynchon's short fiction, and appended enough biographical data to bring the total to 96 pages. Gracefully written, as we should expect, Tanner's reflections in book form are best described as a sort of appreciation. Measured against mature Pynchon criticism, the monograph seems not so much dated as quaintly cautious, as if Tanner still felt that he had to persuade the establishment that Pynchon is worth its attention.

In some ways, of course, this approach is ideal for the diffident reader dismayed by the attacks of a Gore Vidal or a John Gardner (who do seem to be the establishment) or, more likely, who is simply bewildered by the proliferating scholarship. Somewhere in the Zone of Pynchon criticism, little states are beginning to form, and to judge from surveys of the field by Schaub (PN 7) and by Fuoroli and Clark (in Richard Pearce's Critical Essays on Thomas Pynchon [G.K. Hall, 1981]), the bureaucracies are fairly advanced. The range of criticism these days stretches from the interpretations of "amateur readers" (in Richard Poirier's condescending phrase), who delight in trying to solve the riddles of The Crying of Lot 49 or to identify, say, every hallucinogen mentioned in Gravity's Rainbow, to
the ruminations of the mandarins, who dutifully measure valences between reader and author. At their best, the amateurs track the many allusions to their origins while the mandarins sketch the resonant lines of force in Pynchon's narratives; at their worst, the amateurs can succumb to Stencil-like pursuits of clues while the mandarins can warp their obsessions into Jamf-like arrogance.

Tanner avoids the extremes of both types, although he shades toward the mandarin position. Mandarins almost always quote the passage from *Gravity's Rainbow* that ends: "Is the baby smiling, or is it just gas? Which do you want it to be?" in order to conclude--triumphantly--that the reader can discover ambiguity here. At this point, the amateur reader, like Lyle Bland's son Buddy, may understandably elect to go see *The Bride of Frankenstein*. Tanner quotes the passage, not at all smugly, but manages to include a few fashionable remarks, some of them extremely pertinent, on codes and texts. *Gravity's Rainbow*, he says, "is only one text but it contains a multiplicity of surfaces; modes of discourse are constantly turning into objects of discourse with no one stable discourse holding them together" (77).

Reading texts is of course crucial to understanding Pynchon's purposes, and there is something sweet about the assumptions that Tanner brings to the task. He begins his book with a chapter called "Thomas Pynchon and the Death of the Author," taking his title from Roland Barthes's 1968 essay (translated in *Image/Music/Text*) in which the French critic asserts, among other things, that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author." Given Pynchon's celebrated passion for personal invisibility and his apparent determination to be publicly separated from his texts, Tanner finds the aphorism especially appropriate to the American recluse. While some of Barthes's text does illuminate Pynchon's, this particular assertion strikes me as a species of what a colleague with a fine talent for ethnic slur calls "frogthink," after the French propensity for calling a spade a signifier. Fascinated by text, Gallic critics lay out elaborately rational tables of signs and syntax, then, unable to tolerate their own systems,
subvert them by factoring in anachronisms like the morbidity of the artist. Although Tanner’s chapter title might enchant the undergraduate (who can thus the more easily accept Pynchon as a great writer who courts literary suicide) and please some critics (who like to think that Pynchon is morbidly fixated on death), Pynchon himself resists this kind of romanticism. For example, in his self-loathing and megaloman- nical hysteria, the narrator of *Gravity’s Rainbow* may resemble the destructive V. and Blicero as they hurl themselves at interfaces of life and death, but Pynchon himself is not to be confused with his narrator or his characters. Moreover, to deny one’s self a public identity is one thing; to abdicate the office of author, to shift the burden of interpretation to the reader, is quite another.

The point would not be worth making, perhaps, were it not that latent romanticism leads Tanner consis- tently to undervalue the significance of science and especially of technology in the novels. For Pynchon, language is man’s primal technology. For him, the writer as manipulator of language is as much a technologist as the synthesizer of a polymer or the ballistics expert on a rocket-team, and like them, he bears responsibility for his creations. Tanner cer- tainly knows how much sheer inventiveness and tech- nical skill go into Pynchon’s narratives, for few critics are more enthused about the “mixed writings” (another gleaning from Barthes) of the fiction, yet his comments on the technology of writing take the form of special pleading for the author, who, Tanner seems to suggest, disappears from his text untainted by his labors.

"There is a good deal of well-informed technological reference in *Gravity’s Rainbow*," says Tanner, "in- serted not gratuitously but to demonstrate how tech- nology has created its own kind of people (servants) with their own kind of consciousness (or lack of it)" (74). To believe that bit of conventional wisdom is to ignore the book’s explicit associations between language and technology and to patronize Pynchon him- self, who knows that the web of discourse is no less artifice than any inventor’s fabrication, that the world as construed by the writer is no less unreal
than any scientist's conception of it, and that the artist's motives are no less morally ambivalent than any engineer's. If it is true that literature operates as something more than the mechanical encoding and decoding of texts, it is also true that any technology—even one twisted by perversity—operates as something more than the transformation of intimidated humans into still duller objects. Acknowledging that fact—insisting that it is the romantic longing for transcendence that perverts—is ultimately Pynchon's chief claim to stature as a writer.

Romantic assumptions also predispose Tanner to overvalue V. If his treatment of Pynchon's first novel, with the nicely pointed critical oppositions between hothouse and street, communion and tourism, is still a splendid one, his argument that the book is underrated falters on Tanner's fondness for the fin de siècle theme of romantic decadence. That V. is concerned with such decadence is undeniable; that Pynchon himself finds the theme simplistic is also evident from the complex changes he rings on the theme in his later work.

Tanner's preference would be forgivable were it not for his apparent conviction that the shallow use to which Pynchon puts the metaphor of entropy in V. remains a constant in The Crying of Lot 49 and Gravity's Rainbow. In V., entropy is equated almost solely with cultural decline, an equation that even Henry Adams toward the end of his life would dismiss as sophomoric. (I hope that Tanner will read Daniel Simberloff's "Entropy, Information, and Life: Biophysics in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon," Perspectives in Biology and Medicine, 21, 4 [1978], easily the best discussion to date of Pynchon's superlative post-V. handling of entropy as metaphor and theme.) It is hard to imagine a more impressive first novel than V., but it has nowhere near the brilliance of Pynchon's subsequent work.

Tanner does not lavish the same degree of analysis on The Crying of Lot 49 and Gravity's Rainbow. In the case of CL 49 that is perhaps just as well, for he makes a half-hearted attempt to explain the title with reference to the Gold Rush of '49. Taken far
enough, the strained linkage would suffice to enroll Tanner among the amateurs. Nonetheless, in his final two chapters, especially that on Gravity's Rainbow, Tanner's critical acumen and his reading of the structuralists prove most rewarding. From Lacan, Levi-Strauss, and Henry Lefebvre he borrows insights of precise relevance to Pynchon's fiction. Pynchon's characters, Tanner says, suffer from an "overabundance of signifier." Too much to read, too much information to interpret, too many signals to decode: it is a plight peculiarly modern, and Pynchon's genius lies in his ability to make us share in a bewilderment that is ultimately our own. Tanner's is a succinct explanation for the many languages, modes of discourse, types of behavior, and mixed writings that the texts contain. My only complaint here is that the discussion is too brief, considering the provocative ideas raised. When Tanner seizes on "frames," for example, a term he picks up from Poirier, he seems to be referring less to the word's cinematic sense than to the kind of "frame analysis" that Erving Goffman attributes to "the organization of experience." I should very much like to see Tanner dwell on his conception at extended length.

Tanner's wide learning and capacious intelligence, however, should have contributed more to this modest book. Ninety-six pages offer too limited a forum for a critic of Tanner's caliber. On the other hand, the volume's brevity will probably ensure its success as a popular introduction to Pynchon. And, despite my quarrels with the critic here, I think it will be successful: Thomas Pynchon is an eminently readable text.

Long Island University
Notes


"Paradigms Reclaimed: The Language of Science in Gravity's Rainbow," Dwight Eddins, University of Alabama.

"Cosmology and the Point of (No) Return in Gravity's Rainbow," N. Katherine Hayles, Dartmouth College.

"Pynchon's Center of Gravity," Molly Hite, Cornell University.


For copies of papers, send $1 to Joseph W. Slade.

Abstracts of three of the four papers follow; the fourth was unavailable.

Paradigms Reclaimed...

Though hardly the first to dispute claims that scientific language is "value-free" and entirely objective, Thomas Pynchon offers in Gravity's Rainbow an unusually dramatic and vivid expose of the biases and camouflaged control mechanisms inherent in this language. Ironically, however, the very drama, vividness, ingenuity, and humor of the expose revitalize and lend complex coloration to the supposedly neutral language, revealing it as a system of useful alternative metaphors for describing the fertile intricacy of our experience.

The epistemological framework that makes this reclamation possible is intuited by Leni Pöklér, who is actually trying to defend her astrology against scientific attacks: "'It all goes along together. Parallel, not series. Metaphor. Signs and symptoms."
Mapping on to different coordinate systems" (GR 159). What we really have here is a description of the epi-
steme that governs the novel and assures that multiple
analogous systems interpenetrate in a sort of semantic
orgy. What science loses in uniqueness and dominance
it gains in humanistic richness and relevance to the
immediacies of existence.

Even partial differential equations are redeemable. One such, describing "motion under the aspect of yaw
control" (GR 239) is literally reproduced by Pynchon,
and shown to be a metaphor for a "bourgeois" mode of
life that uses "feedback" mechanisms to avoid any
social or spiritual challenge to its vapid complacency.
The mathematical symbols also evoke "Rainy days"
marked by a "haughty glass grayness" and "a monochrome
overlook of valleys crammed with mossy deadfalls."
It is true that this landscape is an unhealthy one, a
harbinger of spiritual entropy, but it is at the same
time haunting and touchingly elegiac.

Just how tendentious scientific description can be is revealed to us by Dr. Laszlo Jamf, who advocates a
Nazi chemistry that would explore the synthetic possi-
bilities of **ionic** bonding—in which electrons are
fascistically seized—in opposition to **covalent**
bonding—in which electrons are communistically shared.
Jamf's interpretation of the facts is, of course, gra-
tuitously extreme; but the basic antithesis that pro-
duced it is clearly shown as a generator of metaphors,
a demonstration that the human psyche cannot avoid
finding mirrors of its own tensions in what would seem
to be the most inhuman, objective phenomena of nature.
And once a given mirroring has been made explicit it remains bonded—whether covalently or ionically—to
the phenomenon as one of its overtones.

Perhaps the richest of Pynchon's linguistic **jeux
d'esprit** is his exploration of the two shallow S's that constitute the double integral sign. Here he combines the logical associations of scientific for-
mulae with a free-wheeling semiotics of visual analogy.
The things that resemble this sign are the two light-
ning flashes of the elite Gestapo unit, the tunnels
of the **Mittelwerke**, the ancient rune that stands for
yew trees and death, and—most incongruously—two
lovers asleep in bed. Pynchon finds in the double
integration that turns acceleration into distance a "backward symmetry" (GR 301)--a grotesque mirror-reversal of human processes, a reminder of the reciprocal reflection between human experience and inhuman science. But while this reminder constitutes a warning against letting the Rocket have this "life of its own," it also constitutes an opening of scientific language toward the fullness of experience. Runes, symbols, simulacra--all suddenly acquire that degree of ominous connectedness that leads us to paranoia. And paranoia--linguistically speaking--is the state of ultimate signification, a condition of overwhelming metaphorical richness that invests the most abstract signifiers with the color and the human relevance of a contiguous poetry.

A last bit of evidence that Pynchon is as concerned with rehabilitation as with exposure is provided by passages in which the language of science is used almost entirely for purposes of comic enrichment. This is the case where we find the GI barber Eddie Pensiero concerned with questions of frequency modulation and Fourier analysis as one observes and classifies human shivers. Pynchon then applies a similar scientific grid to the hairs Eddie is cutting. While there is a mock-scientific tone here reminiscent of Gulliver's voyage to Laputa, the prevailing impression is of science domesticated and brought into an affirmative familiarity with the poor preterite people whom its misapplications threaten.

Pynchon's Center of Gravity

The rhetoric of Gravity's Rainbow continually suggests that the novel's Center, or central insight, lies buried beneath layers of semantic accretion, and appears to encourage a modernist reading that would take the "gravity's rainbow" of the title as a structural metaphor. Such a reading might examine how, by bringing in the image of an arc determined by the Newtonian "force" of gravity, Pynchon surreptitiously invokes a whole context in which the concept of a determining "force" undergoes successive reinterpretations until, in the nineteenth century, gravity replaces God as center and source of a mechanistic
universe, and the second law of thermodynamics gives this universe a direction (downward, "betrayed to Gravity") and a destination (in terminal heat-death). A reading governed by the metaphor of the rocket's arc would thus be deeply pessimistic, confining the action to what seems to be a preordained historical curve and counseling gravitas in the face of an inevitable grave-ward decline.

But such a modernist reading, based on metaphors derived from modern (i.e., pre-Einsteinian) science, paradoxically emphasizes the novel's postmodernism, for Gravity's Rainbow does not sanction a definitive reading or yield an unambiguous central insight about the shape and direction of history. Instead, it overflows the boundaries that it appears to have set for itself, and derives the rationale for this overflowing from developments in twentieth century physics and mathematics. Relativity theory denies the centrality of gravitational "force" in physical explanations; similarly, Pynchon, by denying his novel what amounts to a center of gravity, is able to open up a fictional universe that might have remained a closed system, subjecting it to an outrageous application of Gödel's theorem "restated" as Murphy's Law and suggesting that any purportedly universal ordering principle is still subject to "surprises."

... Pynchon's Fields of Force...

We don't know much about Thomas Pynchon. We don't know how he writes. We don't know what he has in mind. We do know that he studied science as well as English at Cornell, that he worked for Boeing aircraft before starting to write full time, that physicists and mathematicians have verified the accuracy of his complex scientific allusions, and that he has written three novels. The more we learn about modern physics, the better we understand Pynchon's novels—not only thematically but structurally as well. I would like to focus on the structures. I will not attempt to explain them or reduce them by application of scientific theory. I will simply start with the assumption that Pynchon has a thorough understanding of and feel for both physics and literature. And with this assumption
in mind, I will examine, as empirically as possible, the endings of his three novels. I will draw on Heisenberg's uncertainty principle (that the more certain we are about the location of an electron, the more uncertain we are of its velocity), Bohr's concept of complementarity (that contradictory views or models of a phenomenon are not mutually exclusive), field theory (that the pattern or structure of a field, rather than its material manifestation, is the reality), and calculus (the science of endings).
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.

WORKS BY PYNCHON:


CRITICISM AND COMMENT:


A brief discussion of V.


A meditation on waste.


Cites Pynchon's "homage" to the preterite.

"... My own feeling is that Pynchon does not exist and neither do the last 500 pages of Gravity's Rainbow, but there is no question whatsoever that Thomas Pynchon is an author."


Passing references to Pynchon.


Pynchon has "toyed for years with the mass-produced icons that have invaded the communal memory."


Harder, Kelsie B. "Names in Thomas Pynchon's V." Literary Onomastics Studies, 5 (1978), 64-80.


"... I think Pynchon, more than any other writer, has set the standard. He's raised the stakes."

Retells the prize-denial story.

Probably the first published announcement of V.


"Thomas Pynchon's fantasies are, in many ways, a consummation of that kind of 'fantastic realism' found in Dickens, Dostoevsky and Kafka."


"One of the greatest and perhaps most optimistic horror stories of our time, Gravity's Rainbow, takes place on the border that separates time, diversity, and cause and effect from eternity, unity, and synchrony; it maintains an energetic suspension of interlocking elements, which are a Gestalt of the narrating persona as well as the simultaneous self of the mind of the text."


Klinkowitz, Jerome. Rev. of The Grim Phoenix: Reconstructing Thomas Pynchon, by William M. Plater. JEGE, 78, No. 3 (1979), 466-68.


Martin, Richard. "Clio Bemused: The Uses of History in Contemporary American Fiction." Sub-Stance, 27 (1980), 13-24. (13, 16-18, 24, Discusses Lot 49: "... one of the characteristics of the new fiction's use of historical 'material' is the banishment of teleology from the frame of reference within which the fictionist is writing."


Compares Joyce's and Pynchon's puns.

Morrow, Lance. "We Need More Writers We'd Miss." Time, 26 Jul. 1982, 64.

Typical Timeses: "Thomas Pynchon dwells somewhere in an aloof privacy, in deep cover, making metaphysical devices in his basement, like a terrorist who has gone into the fireworks business."


Compares Pynchon and García Márquez; discusses Lot 49: Pynchon's comedy, "while often dark and lacking the festive quality of Fielding, is none the less a way of balancing our horror with a saving grace."


Discusses Lot 49 in terms of a convergence of C. P. Snow's two cultures, which appears to be the outcome of a regressive tendency.

Poenicke, Klaus. "Jenseits von Puer und Senex: der Pikaro und die Figurenphänomenologie der
"Perhaps the Picaro, traditionally an 'unbalanced' figure, forever meandering between servile submission to senex pressures and fits of puer rebellion, adapts with particular ease to the dramatization of a more open, tolerant, process-oriented mode of experience."


Pynchon "applies scientific theory itself—an imitation of true technologists who apply physics to hardware—in deriving a structure for his 'entropic' works."


Contains The Crying of Lot 49 (723-833), annotated.


Special praise for "Under the Rose." Perhaps the first review of any of Pynchon's works.


"Making ridiculous and grotesque the complex of . . . meaning systems that envelop us, Pynchon's metaphors proliferate freely to reveal
both how meaning systems do interpenetrate and tend toward aggressive totalization, and yet how no system can bear too much input before it starts to fall apart under its own weight."


Uses Slothrop and Pynchon as instances.


Mentions V.


"Nothing since Finnegans Wake cries for commitment like the first sentences of *Gravity's Rainbow.* . . . Pynchon forces the resolution of modes off the page and into our lives, where it belongs. If we let him."


Polly Esther "also had a secret desire to be the other Mrs. Pynchon, the wife of the novelist. She had read one of Pynchon's novels once while dieting, and maybe she had used just a little bit too many of those diet pills, because she believed every word of it."

FORTHCOMING:

Contributors

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"Order in Thomas Pynchon's 'Entropy'" in the Journal of Narrative Technique, and three previous contributions to PN.

JOSEPH SLADE is Professor of English, Chairman of the Department of Media Arts, and Director of the Communications Center at Long Island University; he is also Editor of the Markham Review. He is the author of Thomas Pynchon (Warner Paperbacks, 1974) and of numerous articles on Pynchon and related topics, most recently "Thomas Pynchon: Post-Industrial Humanist" and "Cybernetic Discontinuity and pre-World War II American Literature."

The editors would also like to thank the following for their contributions to this issue of Pynchon Notes: Sanford Ames, Bernard Duyfhuizen, Dwight Eddins, Jonathan Grudin, John Guzowski, Molly Hite, Carole Holdsworth, Jerome Klinkowitz, Gretchen Krafft, Don Larsson, Brian McHale, Cliff Mead, Edward Mendelson, Stacey Olster, Richard Pearce, Marta Sienicka, Michael Silverblatt, Steve Weisenburger, and Craig Werner.